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“I saw Othello’s visage in his mind”, or “White Mask, Black Handkerchif”: Satoshi Miyagi’s *Mugen-Noh Othello* and Translation Theory

Abstract: This paper tries to detect key elements in the translated performance of Shakespeare by focusing on Satoshi Miyagi’s “Mugen-Noh *Othello*” (literally meaning “Dreamy Illusion Noh play Othello”), first performed in Tokyo by Ku=Nauka Theatre Company in 2005, and subsequently seen in New Delhi, having now acquired a classic status of renowned Shakespearean adaptation in a foreign language that bridges a gap between the traditional form of Noh and the modern stage-presentation.¹

Keywords: translation, Shakespeare, Mugen-Noh, Desdemona, Othello

1. Translation and Traditional theatres

Watching traditional theatres become culturally significant at the interface with otherness, as the distance between “our own” traditions and our lives in our cultures is as expansive as the one between “alien” traditions and us. The spectator of traditional theatres becomes involved with multi-layered processes of translation in which the actor’s body becomes a palimpsest on which a number of historical gazes are super-scribed. The spectator is able to interpret an accumulation of different memories contained in the actor’s body as something comparable with his or her contemporary otherness. Traditional theatres create sites where past memories are revoked through translation, but ultimately transferred back into the past. Translatability rests on our awareness of the differences between past and present, between self and other, as well as of the compatibilities between the two.

This paper suggests that this “Mugen-Noh *Othello*” searches for the realm of non-translatability which any theatrical production in a language other than the original has to deal with. By analyzing several scenes in this production, I

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¹ The edited film recording of this performance is available through Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive (A|S|I|A) website.

argue that translation on stage could revitalize cross-cultural negotiations not between outer forms but between inner-most traditions of particular speech-acts.

In the early 1950s the English literary critic, I. A. Richards who spent some years in Japan wrote an essay "Towards a Theory of Translating", claiming that translation "may probably be the most complex type of event in the evolution of the cosmos".² Staying in a foreign country would be an occasion to reflect on the translatability of cross-cultural experiences for anyone, but translation of theatrical forms is probably more complex than this "most complex type of event", as it has to deal with not only written forms but all forms of human communication, from bodily movements, scenic designs, musical idioms to cultural conventions and political ideas.

It would be fair to say that it will involve all three categories of translation defined by Roman Jakobson, intra-lingual, inter-lingual and inter-semiotic.³ Therefore studies of translation in the theatre would be an appropriate place to include the wider cultural issues of textual production and consumption and to disturb the accepted boundaries between the "original" and "adaptation".

Theatre could be defined as a form of artistic representation that presupposes "the impossible". The "(im-)possibility" is manifested at various levels. First of all, theatre is an imperfect endeavor to describe the real events by human bodies and words. Any media is nothing but a bridge toward realities, and as such, even if it tries to represent events, it has to accept its own limit that it can't match the "reality". Despite these restrictions, or rather because of these limits, theatre can be a universal representation of the daily incidents such as life and death, love affairs and mental pains. Theatre also has a special kinship to non-existing existence such as "ghost" that does not exist yet is connected with human psyche and fantasy. As such pieces as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or Zeami's *Izutu* illustrate, the ghost resides in the in-between space or the contact zone between this world and another world, and its visit will open the topos that makes the impossible possible. Furthermore, as a cooperative venture between stage and auditorium, actor and spectator, theatre suspends the audience's daily sense. The theatrical experience is the process of translation itself that reverses the relationship between reality and representation.

In *The Principle of Reason*, Martin Heidegger writes about translation as not only interpretation but tradition in the sense of handing-down from one epoch to another, as he says that translation "belongs to the innermost movement

² I.A. Richards, "Towards a Theory of Translating" in Arthur F. Wright (ed.) *Studies in Chinese Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 250.

³ Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation" in Reiner Schulte and John Biguenet (eds), *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), p. 145.

of history.”⁴ Heidegger’s ideas about translation will invite us to ponder on the significance of traditional styles in theatre. Watching traditional theatres such as Noh and Kabuki in Japanese case can become a culturally meaningful experience only at the interface with otherness, because the distance between “our own” tradition and ourselves is as far away as the one between “the alien” tradition and ourselves. In order for traditional theatres to have an appeal, the spectator has to be involved with multi-layered processes of translation in which the actor’s body becomes a palimpsest on which a number of historical gazes are super-scribed. Then the spectator is able to interpret an accumulation of different memories contained in the actor’s body as something comparable with his or her contemporary otherness. Traditional theatre is a site where past memories are translated, revoked and revived, but ultimately transferred back into the past. Translatability rests on our awareness of the differences between past and present, between self and other, as well as of the compatibilities between the two.

For example, in Noh theatre, particularly in Mugen-Noh (phantasmal Noh), Waki (the mediator usually represented by a Buddhist priest) encounters Shite (the spirit or ghost of a dead person, frequently in the form of a “mad woman” who begrudges against her own past) so that past memories of Shite can be evoked through Waki as the latter always already recognizes the sheer otherness of the former. Waki is a role that has typically lost his family members or been tired of his job, wandering without any purpose in his life. As a person who holds a deep lacuna within his psyche, he can help out a ghost within Shite who is possessed by a deep-seated rancor. In other words, Waki is a being of “in-between-ness” that bridges this world with gods or spirits of other worlds. In Noh theatre, Waki can mediate between the spectator and the tradition only so far as he distances himself from Shite and abandons his right of ownership towards the other’s cultural memories. The task of the translator is akin to that of Waki, as it involves a certain abandonment, because translation is always to be translated into the domain in which what is to be translated has already been expressed originarily.

2. Miyagi’s “*Mugen-Noh Othello*” and Cross-cultural Negotiation

The board game “Othello” is said to have been named so by its dramatic reversal of fortunes between black Othello and white Desdemona. Its origin, Shakespeare’s *Othello* is a drama in which the blackness and whiteness intermingles with each other in the world where the two is dualistically demarcated in terms of colonialism, racism, militarism, nationalism,

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1957), p.164.

ethnic-centrism, class hierarchies and gender discriminations. Blackness suggests not only Othello's skin colour but racial stereotype of lust and sexual and militaristic prowess, whereas, by contrast, whiteness indicates Desdemona's purity and aristocratic upbringing. However, as in the Othello game in which black pieces are instantly turned white, the black and the white are not the opposite but supplementary to each other. This adaptation of *Othello* by Ku-Nauka Theatre Company is an attempt to narrate this tale not through the black perspective, which has been overwhelming modes of presentation in the performance history of this play, but through the white perspective of Desdemona.

I have to emphasize at the outset that this production does not intend to appeal to the spectator's exoticism (regardless of his or her ethnic origin) towards Orientalism: rather, I would argue that by manipulating translation theories this production attempts to problematize conditions behind successful Shakespearean productions. The cross-cultural negotiation in theatrical production such as this has to problematize the translatability and untranslatability of the original dramatic language, not through the overt rendition of outer forms, but through the inner thematic and communicative reconsideration of political and theatrical conventions that can be meaningful only at the site of the actor's bodily interventions.

The success of this particular attempt of cross-cultural negotiation is largely due to the director Miyagi's bold strategy to present the play in "Mugen-Noh" style based on the script written by Yukihiro Hirakawa. Having said that, we have to point out that this *Othello* is not a mere transcription of the original into the traditional or Eastern form of Noh play. For instance, the locution is not a slow mode typical to Noh, but somewhat similar to a modern Japanese play, on one hand based on a naturalistic style of talking, while using a classic literary language.

What aspects of *Othello* in particular are newly revealed by this adaptation within the specific dramatic structure of Mugen-Noh? Let us have a look at the stage structure first: Miyagi constructs a Noh stage in front of a lake in the Japanese garden of Tokyo National Museum, which does look like a small island in the lake, powerfully evoking an image of Cyprus in the Mediterranean, a militaristic focus of strategic importance since Shakespeare's time to the present, surrounded by the three continents of Asia, Europe and Africa. The play is opened by the Waki character, a pilgrim visiting the island. This pilgrim (Maki Honda) who has come from Venice to Cyprus for the first time tells that she is impressed by the island's characteristics that look exotic to her.

According to this pilgrim, several years have passed since Cyprus experienced the tragedy of Othello and Desdemona, and the island is now under Turkish occupation after the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. The once glorious Venetian Governor-General's house has been turned into a Neapolitan brothel,

inhabited by those Italian women left in the island when the Venetian army retreated to the mainland. The pilgrim recognized in one such Italian woman, the ghost of Desdemona (Mikari), once the wife of General Othello. The pilgrim recognizes her as Desdemona as she wears a handkerchief spotted with strawberries, but this handkerchief is now not white but black. This black handkerchief is a symbol of the uncanny character of Desdemona’s ghost, the Shite-figure in this Mugen-Noh play. You could surmise that in the present island of Cyprus under Turkish control, the Venetian value of whiteness is transformed into the heathen blackness.

It is essential to note that in this Mugen-Noh rendition of the play, the Shite, the principal character of the play is not Othello but Desdemona, who in Shakespeare’s original is silenced, suppressed and finally violently smothered, mounting little resistance, and having narrated no tale of her own, perpetually remained an “obedient wife” as well as a “lustful strumpet”. Having visited the island as the ghost, she is now able to tell a tale, paradoxically vibrant with energy, in the world where life and death are intermingled. In other words, this Mugen-Noh style *Othello* re-appropriates the history rendered from the Venetian patriarchal viewpoint into a her-story of the stranded women and marginalized Desdemona.

3. Desdemona in “Temptation Scene”

After the pilgrim encounters Desdemona, Desdemona vanishes from the stage for some time (Nakairi, or interval). In the Ai-Kyogen, the comical between-the-acts-play, we see other characters such as Othello (Kazunori Abe), Iago (Kouichi Otaka), and Brabantio (Souichiro Yoshiue), who all wears wooden masks. However, whereas Mikari’s Desdemona overwhelmingly shines in her presence, these male characters move and talk as if they were characters in a cardboard game. By contrast, though Desdemona does not wear a mask (so-called “Jiki-Men, meaning “no mask” or “direct mask”), her face looks as if she wore a mask of Jiki-Men because of the absolute stillness in her facial features.

After the interval Kyogen-play, Desdemona enters again, this time in the guise when she was alive, recounting the memories of her turbulent life. Significantly, when Iago successfully dupes Othello into believing her disloyalty, Desdemona silently watches from the margin: the realities behind their conspiracies that living Desdemona would never have known are now observed by the ghost Desdemona.

Because Desdemona when she was alive did not see this scene, this cannot be her recollections. From what kind of topos does Desdemona gaze at this scene? According to the Noh play conventions, what the Shite-character such as Desdemona tells is her past regrets, grudges and unfulfilled desires, so if this

adaptation merely formerly uses Noh style in order to raise exotic curiosities, this scene must simply belong to the past. However, from the audience's point of view, this scene belongs nothing but to the present, which is "now" prior to the murder of Desdemona; at the same time, this can also be the "past" precisely because of the watchful presence of Desdemona. Here, Mugen-Noh style, more than a conventional "Eastern" framework, provides a pivotal theatrical technique to allow the audience to be suspended between the past and the present. Or rather, through our own recognition of the inevitable tie between the past and the present, we witness an intersection of the plural time flows. Within Mugen-Noh style, the present intermingles with the past, as the ghost reveals the living woman in the present tense.

4. Desdemona's "suicide"?

The probable reason we come up with why Desdemona became the ghost is because she was killed with the stained name of unchastity. Strikingly, however, when she is actually killed on the stage before our very eyes, the scene is, rather than a representation of the past murder, but a presentation of the newly devised scene of killing, in which Desdemona is willingly presenting her body for the kill. Please pay attention to the tips of her fingers immediately before she is murdered: when she is about to cover with one white hand with the other, as if one hand tries to deny the other, very gently, like feathers, the two hands ultimately do not clasp each other. Then after that, she puts on a brown gauntlet on one hand taken out from a pot and strangles herself with the two hands, one brown, the other white of her own. It does look as if Desdemona is choked by both Othello and Desdemona. The crucial words Desdemona and the chorus calls out is "For a moment my body hesitates" ("Shibashi wagamiwa tameraite").

Are we to assume that these words represent Othello's hesitation before the murder? The scene allows us to think that it is in fact Desdemona herself that hesitates, before her making her own minds up to kill herself, to share the destiny with Othello.

This Mugen-Noh *Othello* leads us to a world turned inside out, where the double action of the black man and the white woman here singularly carried out by Desdemona opens up a door to life not to death, since Desdemona transforms herself from the victim of patriarchal violence to the creator of her story ("herstory") to placate her own death and turn the past death into the present life.

In her dance after Desdemona strangles herself, the two hands clasp each other gently: the colored and the white do not oppose against each other, nor turned one from the other, but get liberated from the dualism of front and back, and meet and get united. Desdemona and Othello finally becomes one.

In a Mugen-Noh play, the ghost usually departs this world in peace by the priest’s prayer who has been listening to the ghost’s story: here, however, through Desdemona’s act of representing her own death, the oppositions between life and death, past and present, man and woman, black and white are dissolved and sublimated.

The bridge that characterizes Noh stage is a “contact zone” between this shore and the other shore. As Desdemona enters and departs the stage through that bridge, Ku=Nauka Mugen-Noh *Othello* bridges together the opposing worlds of black Othello and white Desdemona through the retelling of history (=her story) from the female Shite character.

Shakespeare’s naming of this woman protagonist contains “demon” within her name, and for that matter also she is an ideal figure for the “madwoman” (“Kyoujo”) character in Noh play. Desdemona was desired as a “chaste wife” with the white skin, and at the same time denied as a “cunning whore” with the black name. Was not the white skin of Desdemona another mask? If Othello’s black skin was the source of his tragedy, Desdemona’s white skin also became the victim of Venetian racism. Ku=Nauka Mugen=Noh *Othello* is, ultimately, a drama in which Desdemona takes off her own white mask.

5. Translation as a Release from Possession of Culture

In his celebrated article “The Task of the Translator”, Walter Benjamin famously declares, “It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work.

For the sake of pure language he breaks through decayed barriers of his own language.”⁵ Miyagi Satoshi’s Mugen-Noh *Othello* delves into the untranslatability of this “pure language” imprisoned in Shakespeare’s theatrical language, through liberating Shakespeare’s work from the “Western” theatre of words into the “Eastern” theatre of silence.

Translation is a release from the authority on possession of culture. If so, the task of the translated performance of Shakespearean plays must be a liberation from Shakespearean language that of course “has always been the consort of empire, and forever shall remain its mate”, to borrow from Antonio de Nebrija’s introduction to his *Gramatica Castellana* dedicated to the Queen Isabela of Castile in 1492.⁶ Translation in theatrical performance highlights

⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator”, in Hannah Arendt (ed), Harry Zohn (tr), *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 80.

⁶ Antonio de Nebrija, “Introduction” to his “*Gramatica Castellana*” quoted in Ivan Illich, “Vernacular Values” in his *Shadow Work* (Boston and London: Marion Boyers, 1981), p. 34.

several sites in which not only languages but also genders, theatrical conventions and political ideologies are negotiated and intervened culturally, and as a cross-cultural negotiation, perhaps, nothing is more eloquent than the bridging the gap between life and death.

This instance also reminds us of the fundamental feature of dramatic translation in which we become aware of the distance among voice, language and character, as the theatrical evocation of otherness is also a step toward the multiplicity of the world in which we become aware of our own plural identities open to alienability.⁷ Miyagi Satoshi's "*Mugen-Noh Othello*" realizes the otherness of our own language by releasing Shakespeare from the fictitious and colonial institution that has allowed us to believe that we possess our own language and culture.

⁷ In addition to *Mugen-Noh Othello*, we have recently been blessed with such attempts of "re-writing back" of Shakespeare: Tadashi Suzuki's multilingual *King Lear*, Peter Brook's multiracial *Hamlet*, Satoshi Miyagi's *Macbeth* with the division between "speaker" and "mover", just to name a few.