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## **The Moor for the Malayali Masses: A Study of *Othello* in *Kathaprasangam***

**Abstract:** Shakespeare, undoubtedly, has been one of the most important Western influences on Malayalam literature. His works have inspired themes of classical art forms like *kathakali* and popular art forms like *kathaprasangam*. A secular story telling art form of Kerala, *kathaprasangam* is a derivative of the classical art form, *harikatha*. It was widely used to create an interest in modern Malayalam literature and was often used as a vehicle of social, political propaganda. The story is told by a single narrator who masquerades as the characters, and also dons the mantle of an interpreter and a commentator. Thus, there is immense scope for the artist to rewrite, subvert and manipulate the story. The paper explores V. Sambasivan's adaptation of *Othello* in *kathaprasangam* to bring out the transformation the text undergoes to suit the cultural context, the target audience and the time-frame of the performance. The text undergoes alteration at different levels—from English language to Malayalam, from verse to prose, from high culture to popular art. The paper aims at understanding how a story set in a different time and distant place converses with the essential local milieu through selective suppression, adaptation and appropriation.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, adaptation, *kathaprasangam*, Sambasivan, *Othello*, Desdemona.

Malayalam, though confined to the tiny state of Kerala, can undeniably boast of a vibrant literary culture. A casual perusal of books in any Malayalam library would throw up an impressive list of texts translated into Malayalam from languages all over the world. Shakespeare, undeniably, is one writer who holds sway over many a Malayali heart. The familiarity to Shakespeare is primarily because of his plays and sonnets being an integral part of the school and university curriculum in Kerala. Shakespeare's plays have been translated multiple times into Malayalam starting from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the contemporary times. Many times these translations were highly appropriated to suit the Malayali context and sensibilities. Shakespeare has also been adapted to popular art forms such as movies and radio plays. Another interesting adaptation

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of Shakespeare has been to *kathaprasangam*, a popular art form in Kerala in the twentieth century. This essay explores V. Sambasivan's adaptation of *Othello* in *kathaprasangam* to bring out the transformation the text undergoes to suit the cultural context, the target audience and the time-frame of the performance. The text undergoes alteration at different levels—from English language to Malayalam, from verse to prose, from high culture to popular art. The essay aims at understanding how a story set in a different time and distant place converses with the essential local milieu through selective suppression, adaptation and appropriation.

Sisir Kumar Das comments that the reception of Shakespeare in different languages in India is “complex and problematic as the story of Western impact on Indian literature itself,” and a definite pattern of translations and degree of influence is difficult to be ascertained (42). He however observes that the first phase of translations of Shakespeare in Indian languages involved “indigenization” or “Indianization” through adaptations (46). This was the case in Malayalam literature too. Shakespeare was introduced into Malayalam literature as early as 1866 when Kallor Oommen Philipose freely adapted *A Comedy of Errors* as *Almarattam* “with the intention of introducing the Western form of drama into Malayalam” (Nair 128). Several works of Shakespeare have been translated into Malayalam since then. In most of the translations, right from the very first one by Philipose, Malayalis have always strived to make Shakespeare their own. Thus Petruchio becomes Parthasarathy, Hippolyta becomes Kanakalekha and Athens become Avantidesam (Jayashree 130-131). Many celebrated poets and reputed scholars took up the challenge of rendering Shakespeare into Malayalam, including Vallathol Narayana Menon and Kunjikuttan Thampuran.<sup>1</sup> Vallathol “made a free rendering of *The Merchant of Venice* with the help of an English-knowing friend” while Thampuran translated *Hamlet* with the help of a friend in 1897 (George 149). Shakespeare's rich use of the blank verse posed a veritable challenge to translators who diverted much of their creative energy into experimenting with the metre, fitting the verses into either classic Sanskrit metres or Dravidian metres. Many translators also tried free verse, and even poetic prose. For example, Kainikkara Kumara Pillai is faithful to the important scenes in the play “though they are interspersed with interpretative comments and elucidations” (77). According to him, “the major portion of the book was devoted to an imaginative interpretation and appreciation of the various characters in the play,

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<sup>1</sup> Vallathol Narayana Menon (1878-1958) is considered to be one of the three principal modern poets of Malayalam literature, the other two being Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer and Kumaran Asan. The Malayalam poet, Kunjikuttan Thampuran (1868-1913) is known as Kerala Vyasan for his translation of the *Mahabharata*.

their motivations, inner reactions and struggles” (77). Shakespeare translation is definitely an on-going literary activity. A collection of translations of thirteen plays by eminent writers such as Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, P.K. Venukkuttan Nair and others has been compiled and published in an anthology as recently as 2012.

The obsession with the lyrical beauty of Shakespearean passages often led to the neglect of the theatrical elements of the play. Not many Shakespearean plays were performed in Malayalam theatre though the bard’s art of characterization did inspire many Malayalam playwrights who tried to imitate his grandeur in the portrayal of heroic characters. Jayashree Ramakrishnan Nair attributes this to the lack of “proper staging facility and the consequent infeasibility of theatrical realization” (138) and the influence of realist drama. Kainikkara Kumara Pillai suggests that Malayalam drama in its early stages conformed to the patterns of Sanskrit drama. Later Tamil musicals had an impact on Malayalam drama. He observes:

By the time Malayalam playwrights began to look to the West for inspiration, Shakespeare, though still honoured and still kept active on the English stage, had long been outmoded in style and technique, and it was the modern masters like Ibsen and Shaw, Galsworthy and Maugham, Coward and O’Neil that caught their admiring eyes. (80)

Of the few stage productions, VN Parameswaran Pillai’s production of *Othello* in 1967 received accolades, and was later adapted for The All India Radio, Trivandrum station. PK Venukkuttan Nair’s *Othello* (1991) is another notable production. Besides these there could be many amateurish productions that have not been properly recorded (Nair 138). Recent attempts at producing Shakespeare was by noted theatre director Kavalam Narayana Panikkar who produced *The Tempest* as *Kodumkattu* (2000) in folk theatre form. Chandradasan’s earlier production of the same play, *Chathankattu* (1995) and *Macbeth* (2002) and MG Jyothish’s production of *Macbeth* (2009) are commendable contributions and have added new layers of understanding to his plays. In addition, Malayalis have also experimented with Shakespeare’s plays in movies like *Kaliyattam* (1997), an almost faithful and celebrated adaptation of *Othello*; *Karmayogi* (2012), an uninspiring adaptation of *Hamlet* and *Kannaki* (2001) in which one can manage to find, with some effort a resonance of *Antony and Cleopatra*. An important venture has been *kathakali* performances based on Shakespeare stories. Sadanam Balakrishnan’s *Othello* (1996), and Annette Leday/Keli Company’s *King Lear* (1999) have been widely discussed by Shakespeare scholars. Another interesting adaptation has been in the form of *kathaprasangam*.

*Kathaprasangam* (literally, story-speaking), which may be regarded as the modern Malayalam version of *harikatha*<sup>2</sup>, in which a single person or *kadhikan* (story-teller), narrates a story, interspersed with songs with minimal musical accompaniment. A fast dying art under the onslaught of visual media, *kathaprasangam* was usually held during temple or church festivals or social or political gathering, and used to attract large crowds. The narrator would sometimes role play modulating his voice, and songs would be set to the tune of popular Malayalam film songs. *Kathaprasangam* rose to the heights of its popularity in the times of V. Sambasivan who was a communist sympathizer. He brought in new narratives from world literature besides popularizing through his art works of Malayalam literary masters. Thus revolutionary Russian novels and tragic Elizabethan plays shared platform with the modern social narratives of Malayalam writers Thakazhi and Kesava Dev<sup>3</sup>. A large number of works from other Indian languages also found voice in the narrator's art.

Sambasivan's narration of *Othello* (1964) makes an interesting study as the original text undergoes multiple transformations. Firstly, the story which plays out in five acts is condensed into a performance of one hour. Secondly, the narrative and the characters are moulded to converse with the local milieu by way of conduct and language. Thirdly, the classical English Renaissance text is adapted to fit the contours of a popular art form which is unique to Kerala. According to J. Shailaja:

A *kathaprasangam* presentation evinces the fact that theatre is an art for that originated to tell a story. It has all the elements of theatre (Acting, music, chorus, movement: as prescribed by ancient Indian theatre theoretician, Bharata) present in minute forms. The performer even mimics the sound of different characters according to their age, gender, etc. For character transformation, simple devices like a towel or a handkerchief was used. In short, *Kathaprasangam* is equivalent to one-actor plays (in which one actor plays many characters) that is a rage in modern theatre. The performer uses both his face and body and his voice in a very minimalistic; but varied manner (*sookshma abhinayam* — as stated by Bharata Muni). (43-44)

*Kathaprasangam* depends more on the oratory and the dramatic narrative skills of the artist himself and less on the merit of the depth or nuances of the literary work. Just as the stories narrated were intended for the common people, so are

<sup>2</sup> *Harikatha* literally means the story of Hari (God). It is a traditional story telling art form that originated in Andhra Pradesh where the story teller narrates religious stories interspersed with songs with the accompaniment of musical instruments.

<sup>3</sup> Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai is a Jnanpith Award Winner, the greatest literary award in India. Thakazhi and his contemporary Keshava Dev are known for their social novels which criticised the prejudices and hierarchies of caste and class prevalent in the society.

the arrangements required for a performance. It is a highly cost-effective art form and this too led to its popularity among the common people. Moreover, it moved away from the temple precincts where *harikatha* started to take on a more secular and progressive role in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are no rituals associated with the art, not even a customary lighting of the lamp. What marks *kathaprasangam* from other narrative classical art forms of Kerala such as *ottamthullal*<sup>4</sup> and *kathakali* is the simplicity of language and form which would appeal to the common man and the illiterate. *Kathaprasangam* offers a rich contrast to *kathakali* which is a more elite classical performing art that demands detailed arrangements at all levels and an understanding of the nuanced aesthetics of the art. But *kathaprasangam* is a more broad-based popular art. The story is narrated plainly and simply with minimal accompaniments so that it reaches the common man with clarity. *Kathakali* involves more than one performer and the *kathakali padams* are sung by trained experts while a *kathaprasangam* artist most often is not a trained singer or an orator, but only has a talent for singing and story-telling. In short, the success of a *kathaprasangam* performance depends entirely on the dramatic skills of the narrator, and his ability to engage with the audience. In *kathakali*, however, the story is narrated in an elaborate style using *mudras*, body movements and *abhinaya* which takes years of formal training. Since more attention and time is devoted to the time-consuming stylistics the intricate details of the story are left out. In *kathaprasangam* too there is no scope to take up the story in any great detail since such high-energy performance by a single person cannot be sustained beyond an hour.

*Othello's* story in *kathaprasangam*, thus, is stripped down to its basic storyline. Only the main events and characters find space in the narrative. In Sambasivan's hugely popular performance the story minutely focuses on the jealous Othello and the innocent Desdemona. The story is introduced as the "celebrated work of William Shakespeare, the renowned international writer" (Sambasivan). The story starts in Venice and moves on to Cyprus as in the play, but a lot of scenes are dropped or heavily edited. It starts with two lines of a song in which Othello categorically declares his appreciation of Desdemona—"Desdemona is beautiful and is gifted with a talent to sing. She is the very goddess of all virtues and I would never ever doubt her of infidelity," sings Othello. This highlights the focus of the story in *kathaprasangam*. The narrator then very briefly tells the audience that Desdemona is from Venice while her husband Othello is an African Moor who has been through a lot of

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<sup>4</sup> *Ottamthullal* is a classical performing art form developed by Kunjan Nambiar in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as an alternative to *chakyar kuthu*. In *Ottamthullal*, the performer would usually ridicule the shortcomings of important people in the society. It is performed by a single person. The performer is accompanied by *mridangam* and *idakka*, and another person would repeat the verses sung by the performer.

hardships. He was a slave who was exchanged many times before he was brought to Venice by a kind master. Othello joined the armed forces of Venice and slowly rose up in rank to be its General. Cassio is introduced as Othello's lieutenant colonel and a charming young man with a sweet smile and Iago, as the flagbearer of Othello's army. The audience is also told that Iago nurses a grudge towards Othello for he had wanted Cassio's position, but Othello had given it to his dear friend. Iago is now waiting for an opportune moment to seek his revenge. The narrator brings in Roderigo too. He, it is told, is an idiot who has been in love with Desdemona and still hopes that she would be his, even though she is a married woman now.

After this series of introductions the narrator takes us to Venice where the story starts. The narrator in the very beginning foregrounds the theme of fidelity in the story by Othello's statement about his trust in Desdemona's virtues. Since there is no time to delineate the characters though a slow unfolding of the story the audience are already told important details about each character. The action begins on a moonless night on an empty street. This is an addition to make the scene more dramatic and in sync with the villains in action. A role play follows with the narrator imitating two different voices, a bass voice for Iago and a more comical one for Roderigo. The dialogue between Brabantio and Roderigo is peppered with humour with the mighty Brabantio getting reduced to a wailing old father. But all the remarks of Iago and Roderigo with racist and sexual overtones are removed. The only derogatory word used against Othello is "black." The action moves quickly to Othello's castle and later to the Senate House where Desdemona is summoned to confirm Othello's account of their love story. The story moves to Cyprus but the details of Iago's elaborate planning with Roderigo, and Cassio getting into a drunken brawl are omitted. Instead, the narrator throws in some suspense by declaring that "when people who did not drink had a few drinks some terrible things happened" (Sambasivan). It is through the conversation between Cassio and Emilia that one gets to know that Cassio has been dismissed from Office. The parts where Desdemona assures Cassio of her help and Cassio running away seeing Othello are retained.

At this point in the *kathaprasangam*, Iago only utters: "I don't like this!" but this is enough to agonize Othello who feigns headache and shouts at Desdemona when she tries to bind the handkerchief around his head in an attempt to alleviate the pain. Emilia picks up the kerchief to give it to Iago who has been asking for it. There is no scope to dwell on the slow poisoning of Othello's mind by Iago and therefore, Othello immediately demands more proof and Iago tells him of Cassio talking in his sleep. This is another instance when Othello is referred to as "the Black." The famous handkerchief scene is devoted some time as it is a highly dramatic scene with ample scope for voice modulation and music to underscore the tension brewing between the couple.

Bianca is briefly introduced before Iago gets on with his taunts of Othello's manliness and goads him to kill Desdemona in bed. The last scenes where Othello strikes Desdemona in the presence of the Duke's messenger and his interrogation of Emilia are retained. Predictably the murder scene also is highly dramatized. Othello before stabbing himself does not recall his lost glory but rather poses himself as a loving husband who "murdered his wife with a kiss" and therefore willing to "die upon a kiss" (5:2:362).

Shakespeare's *Othello* in *kathaprasangam* thus becomes the story of the frivolousness of a possessive husband and the ill-fate of his lovely and compassionate wife Desdemona rather than the master plan of a "precious villain" or the fall of the mighty Othello who has been fighting his personal psychological battle. In fact, Othello being black is reiterated only to highlight the fairness of Desdemona. Being a black male in a Dravidian context is not considered particularly a disadvantage. Thus "black" itself does not represent otherness in the Kerala context as it would have in Shakespeare's time or in Venice where the play is set. As observed by Poonam Trivedi black is not always associated with evil "in a culture of predominantly dark-skinned people whose major deities and demons are both dark-coloured" (166). In fact there are many popular film songs and poems in Malayalam that describe the beauty of black complexioned women. Thus the references to Othello's self doubt and Iago's continuous taunts about his race do not find much resonance in the *kathaparasangam*. Iago's manipulation of Roderigo and Cassio is also reduced to such a great extent that the "motiveless malignity" goes unnoticed. According to Alan Sinfield, Iago becomes successful in his plan because his stories are plausible, he talks about things that are "common sense" and "culturally given." Major ideologies gather strength by this plausibility (31).

But by removing a major part of these stories, Sambasivan's Othello finds himself with no backing for his irrational behavior. Shakespeare's Desdemona comes across as a naïve and compassionate young woman but the selective editing makes Sambasivan's Desdemona seem more innocent but spirited than Shakespeare's heroine. Sambasivan's Desdemona is completely convinced about her sway over Othello. Even before Cassio requests her to speak to Othello she assures him with conviction that he would be re-instated in office, and that she would put in a word. She presents herself with great ease and confidence almost chiding Othello for not coming home early enough to have lunch for they have been waiting for him (Sambasivan). As the story progresses the audience is left in no doubt as to where the narrator's sympathies lie. He especially dwells on how Othello's slap across Desdemona's face had left red marks on her cheeks which according to him were "as beautiful as roses in full bloom!" Earlier when Othello strikes her, the butter-like softness of her cheeks is contrasted with the harsh palm of a soldier i.e. Othello. The narrator expresses his concern over Desdemona taking up responsibilities without knowing the

“facts.” When Othello accuses her of being a whore, she seems completely unaware of the existence of “such kind of women.” She later asks Emilia: “Will you do it for the world?” Emilia replies: “If we are of the feminine gender, we might also commit such errors.” (Sambasivan). Desdemona is shocked by this response and dismisses her with disgust. Shakespeare’s Desdemona displays hints of a flirtatious temperament when she engages with Iago on a playful discussion about different kinds of women (2:1:122-164). Sambasivan has removed this part from his narration. By doing this he makes Desdemona more straightforward and innocent, yet she is a woman with more self esteem.

In Sambasivan’s version, when Othello hits her in the presence of the Duke’s messenger, Desdemona runs away from Othello saying “I don’t deserve this. Don’t strike me.” The Malayalam word used is “*Enne adikkaruthu*” and not “*enne adikkaruthe*” which would have meant more of a plea. In the murder scene Desdemona’s innocence and repeated reiteration of her loyalty towards Othello would move the audience more than his unjustified charges about her being a “poisonous flower” (Sambasivan). While Othello accuses her squarely of adultery in harsh terms Desdemona answers in verse which makes the contrast more poignant. Desdemona weeps and objects to the charges of being a whore but remarkably does not plead with Othello to let her live for a day or at least till she says a prayer. As Peter Hollindale suggests there was nothing more strange about Desdemona’s love than the general quality of love itself (51). Although earlier the Duke comments that Othello is a lucky man since the beauty queen of Venice has chosen to marry him, there are no descriptions of any repulsiveness of Othello either that would mark him as so different as to make him lose his mind. Othello does not have many arguments to justify his extreme act but he only announces his fear that Desdemona’s beauty might lead many young men astray.

The narrator highlights the change in Othello when he draws the attention of the audience by his comment: “This is the very man who used to say that his wife is the embodiment of all virtues. Now he says that the whore should not have her way!” The strangeness of Desdemona’s love for Othello is less striking in *kathaprasangam* since most of the references to age and appearance of Othello are erased. The tragedy of Othello thus becomes more of Desdemona’s tragedy, a story every Malayali woman entrenched in a patriarchal set up despite her education and economic independence, could relate to. What Adhikary Kakali had commented about *kathakali* Othello, holds true here too: “Desdemona’s murder represents Othello not as a Turk or a Moor or an outsider in European society. It is a reflection of a stereotypical masculine being who always tries to dominate woman folk in society, either east or west” (35). Unlike in *Kaliyattam*, a later film adaptation of *Othello*, where Thamara remains a largely mute and docile feminine presence, Sambasivan’s Desdemona defends herself till the last breath. Significantly, there is no attempt to make her a “saint”



or “re-incarnation of the world of spirit” (Kolin 18) because Desdemona dies without trying to shield Othello’s dastardly act. Sambasivan’s *kathaprasangam* does not narrate the story of a martyr called Desdemona. Neither is it the story of Othello’s complexities or Iago’s brilliant scheming. Sambasivan’s story is that of a wronged woman, the Everywoman. In doing so, Sambasivan departs from the usual ideological construct of a patriarchal society. Even when his politics would have made it easier for him to understand the alienation of Othello who rose to be the commander from being a slave, Sambasivan decides to give voice to the injustice meted out to Desdemona, rather than the psychological trauma of one who has come to be referred to as “master.”

Ania Loomba while discussing Othello in *kathakali* had expressed her apprehension about erasing all references of race: “If Othello is uncritically depicted as the prototype of a good man, his jealousy cannot be understood as something that is generated in and through his racial position. It becomes a ‘universal’ (and therefore ‘understandable’) male response to real or imagined female transgressions. To erase the racial politics of *Othello* is therefore to flatten it into a disturbingly misogynist text” (161). But within the given framework of the Shakespearean play, Sambasivan does his best to remove generalisations about women. By replacing the servile submissiveness of Shakespeare’s Desdemona with a quiet, insistent dignity Sambasivan retells the story of Othello, the Moor to make it the story of Desdemona. Moreover, it would not have suited Sambasivan’s ideology nor the social structure and the political mood of Kerala<sup>5</sup> to mark Othello as a Muslim<sup>6</sup> or as one belonging to a lower class/caste. This decision could also have been facilitated by the audience of *kathaprasangam*.

*Kathaprasangam* served the purpose of affordable entertainment to the illiterate and the middle class, and quenched their taste for drama and to an extent, music. Sambasivan became the darling of the masses by playing up to the hilt colloquial usages, proverbs, allusions and above all humour. For instance, Othello mostly calls Desdemona “*edi*” which is a casual and usually not a respectful way of calling women who are younger or lower to oneself in social status. But this is also the common way a husband would address his wife. Thus, Iago also addresses Emilia as *edi*. Othello too uses this term for Emilia, as she is

<sup>5</sup> Sambasivan, as mentioned earlier, was a communist who did not believe in a feudal social order that perpetuated caste and class system. The first elected Communist government came into power in Kerala in 1957. During 1960s the political atmosphere of Kerala was highly charged. The land reforms accelerated the breaking down of feudal order. Widespread education led even the poorer sections of the society into classrooms resulting in an awakening of the lower caste and lower class masses.

<sup>6</sup> Muslims in Kerala form the second largest religious community in Kerala. They have always been part of the mainstream social, political and cultural affairs of the state, and so, were never considered to be the “other.”

inferior to him in status. In turn Emilia, Iago and Cassio refer to Othello as “*yajamanan*” (master or lord) or “*senanayakan*” (Commander). Iago even in his restricted soliloquies does not refer to Othello in any derogatory term. Desdemona is referred to as “*kochamma*” (mistress or lady) by Cassio, Emilia and Iago. The duke becomes “king” and is referred to as “*thirumanassu*” (highness) in a true Malayali way. Othello commenting on Desdemona’s beauty refers to her in the beginning as an *apsara* (nymph). Colloquial usages like *ashaan*, *aliyan*, *mooppilan* (headman, brother-in-law, old man) find space in the narrative which are common words in every day usage for a local Malayali and create a sense of familiarity to the narrative.

The narrator compares Bianca’s love for Cassio to Vasavadutta’s passion for Upagupta. The story about the celebrated courtesan Vasavadatta and Upagupta, the Buddhist monk was retold by the famous Malayalam modernist poet Kumaran Asan in his poem *Karuna* in 1923. Another way of connecting to the local culture is to introduce four line-songs into the narrative set to the tune of popular film songs of the time. For example, Othello explaining to the Duke the circumstances that made him fall in love with Desdemona, sings: “Desperately waited a lissome beauty/To listen to the stories I told.” These lines are tuned according to the then popular song “*Chandana pallakkil veedu kanan vanna gandharva rajakumara...*” from the Malayalam movie *Palattu Koman* (1962). Another song is set to the tune of a more recent movie song “*innente karalile...*” from the movie *Kuttikkuppayam* released in 1964 itself. These were songs that were playing then on the radio and in playgrounds and temple grounds where festivals and fairs would be held. By expressing their feelings by means of these popular songs the characters came to share the Malayali sensibilities. This also made the story very contemporary, and not something that was written centuries ago in an alien land.

The objective, however, is not to pass off a foreign text as a Malayalam text. In fact, it is just the opposite. However, the narrator unlike the earlier Malayalam translators of the play does not seem to be overwhelmed by the quality of Shakespearean language. The play is in fact stripped off the celebrated soliloquies of Iago and the lyrical articulations of Othello. There are only two instances where the narrator uses the original English dialogue, but none of these are noted for its poetic grace or depth of thought. Othello breaks into English when Brabantio and his men charge towards him: “Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.” Later Iago comments on Desdemona’s beauty at Cyprus: “Look at those inviting eyes.” The phrase “inviting eyes” is used by Cassio in the original text as a response when Iago says: “What an eye she has! methinks it sounds a parley to provocation” (2:3:21-22) Cassio replies: “An inviting eye; and yet methinks right modest” (2:3:23). These English words underline the foreignness of the text forcing the audience to remember that they are listening to a story from a different land, a masterpiece of literature.

Alankode Leelakrishnan recalls, how after one of Sambasivan's narrations of *Othello* in a village, illiterate natives were found animatedly discussing the characters and fortunes of Othello, Desdemona, Iago and Roderigo. These were people who had no access to literature of any kind, but they had welcomed these Shakespearean characters as if their own kin (59). Thus what we see in Sambasivan's *kathaprasangam* is a fine balance of otherness and absorption—"repetition without replication" (Hutcheon 173). It should also be noted that even when he displays a hint of colonial admiration for the bard, he is not hesitant to adapt the story to suit his requirements. This brings to mind Jyotsana Singh's review of Utpal Dutt's adaptation of Shakespeare in the *jatra* form:

This formulation, however, does not presuppose a timeless, universal Shakespeare loved by one and all. Rather it takes into account class, education, and race, among others, as constituent factors in any mode of cultural production. Bringing Shakespeare to the people meant rejecting the conventions of the proscenium stage and working with indigenous theatrical traditions familiar to the rural audience. (455)

It should also be noted that Sambasivan does not limit his stories only to Shakespeare or even to European classics. Works of modern Malayalam writers and revolutionary poets were considered in fact more important to his narrative art. Sambasivan's concept of art might have been very similar to that of Utpal Dutt's who believed that "the classics were not a prerogative of an elite. They would cease to exist unless they were brought to the people" (qtd in Singh 455).

Sambasivan lived and performed in a time when postcolonial readings of Shakespeare had not permeated in the academic and cultural circles and the debates about the "greatness" of the colonial canonical literature were yet to gain ground. Sambasivan's reasons for choosing just two plays, the other being *Romeo and Juliet*, out of the vast literary output of Shakespeare seem to have been simple. He considered Shakespeare a master story teller, and a name the masses should be familiar with. Both the tragedies he had narrated deal with human situations that are universal and easy to identify with especially in a patriarchal situation like that of Kerala. Both are high in drama quotient, and therefore there was scope for a riveting narration. The narration is no doubt a tribute to the literary genius of Shakespeare, but Sambasivan also skillfully adapts Shakespeare to suit his own needs. Even when he removed the complexities evolving out of Othello's race in his narration, thus reducing the character of Othello to a possessive and jealous husband, Desdemona comes alive to share more meaningful space in the narrative. Sambasivan brings in his own retelling into the tale of Shakespeare, fitting it perfectly into his cultural context and his progressive politics. Sambasivan's *Othello* in *kathaparasangam* thus becomes an intercultural text where both the source culture and target culture only stand to gain.

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