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The Image of Indian Othello: The Anxiety of the Elite Indian in Western Society

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Summary

In 1848, an innovative *Othello* was performed at the Sans Souci Theatre in Calcutta, India. Producer Manager, James Barry, managed to cast a native Indian as the title character. Barry's *Othello* was an enormously revolutionary and influential event for the Indian stage as well as for Indian society. Although the native Indian actor, Baishnav Charan Adhaya, was modestly accepted in Western society at first, his second performance was bitterly rejected. This situation is similar to the character Othello's. In India, there were elite Indians like Othello, who were cultivated by the Westerners. Barry gave a representation of the elite Indian people who agonized over their positions in colonial India and were victims of the cunning strategy of the English education system.

Introduction

In 1848, an innovative *Othello* was performed at the Sans Souci Theatre in Calcutta, India. Producer Manager, James Barry, tried something new with his production. He managed to cast a native Indian as the title character. Before that, Indian theaters were in the style of England with, plays produced for a Western audience, and performers were Westerners.

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Adhaya, was modestly accepted in Western society at first, his second performance was bitterly rejected. This situation is similar to the character Othello's. Although Othello, a valiant general in Venice, was at first highly esteemed by the Venetians, afterward he lost everything because he was a Moor. In India, there were elite Indians like Othello, who were cultivated by the Westerners. Native Indians tried to enter the English education system to obtain a higher status. This was the crafty strategy of the Westerners as the ruler to control India as the ruled. This self-serving social structure created plenty of incomplete elite Indians. They were anxious about their identities and suffered double differences: between the Western and the Indian, and between the elite Indian and the primitive Indian. Barry's innovation on the stage reflected the distressing social system as well as the agony of the elite Indian. Barry managed to present his *Othello* to Western audiences despite bitter criticism. His production showed blistering discontent and bitter irony.

I. The Native Indian Actor in the Indian Theatre in 1848

In Calcutta, an innovative theatre showed the problem between race and language in 1848, on August 4th. English plays were produced for the social entertainment of the East India Company. That is, they were produced in the Western style, and lines were in English for the Western audience. James Barry, the owner of The Sans Souci Theatre, ventured to cast a native gentleman as the title role in *Othello*. The Bengali actor, Baishnav Charan Adhara, was not the black-painted white actor hitherto known. He was a 'real' Othello. This production was advertised as an opportunity to see "a real live nigger."¹

Chatterjee and Singh described Adhara's performance as Othello in the Indian journal, *The Bengal Hurkaru*, for the Westerners who resided in India in those days. It was reported, "his pronunciation of English was for a Native remarkably good,"² and that Adhara's turning back to the audience at the climatic soliloquy and the love scene to kiss and hold Desdemona, the English actress Mrs. Anderson, was taboo in the colonial Theatre.³ Another journal, *The Englishman*, describes Adhara's performance by saying, "Othello spoke quite loud enough, but he 'mouthed' too much [...] Taking it as a whole, we consider the performance wonderful for a Native."⁴ The English reviewer modestly esteemed the native Indian actor to the colonial society. However, after the second performance, on September 12th, Adhara was bitterly criticized. In the same journal,

The Englishman, it was stated, “[...] the performance was tame, languid, affected, tedious and imperfect.”⁵ This article implies the real intention of the Westerners to position themselves as the superior or the governor in colonial India.

The first stage of Adhara’s performances received reluctant acquiescence, but the second, received adverse criticism. These articles on Adhara’s Othello represent the aggression of the colonial or the Western in England. Despite using plenty of proper English language, the cultivated Indian actor was perceived as “failed”⁶ in colonial society, as Othello ruined Venetian society.

II. Othello in Shakespeare

Shakespeare’s Othello is the Moor of Venice, the valiant general. The textual image of Othello presented in Act I. Iago and his companion, Roderigo, both Venetians, look down on general Othello. They reveal Othello’s secret love for Desdemona to Brabantio, who is Desdemona’s father and a Venetian Senator. Roderigo alerts Brabantio to keep his eye on his daughter:

If’s be your pleasure and most wise consent
(As party I find it is) that your fair daughter,
[...]
Transported with no worse nor better guard,
But with a knave of common hire, a gondolier,
To gross clasps of a lascivious Moor:
[...]

Your daughter, if you have not given her leave,
I say again, hath made a gross revolt,
Tying her duty, beauty, wit, and fortunes
In an extravagant and wheeling stranger
Of here and everywhere. (*Oth.*, 1.1.120–136) (emphasis added)

Roderigo speaks disparagingly of Othello as “a lascivious Moor” and comments that he is a rootless person who has no kith or kin. The Moor does not belong in Venetian society and he is against Venetians. Othello has no tie with the “stranger” against the Westerners.

Brabantio is afraid for his daughter and goes to her. Afterward, Iago whispers:
It seems not meet nor wholesome to my place

To be produced, as if I stay I shall,
 Against the Moor. For I do know the state,
 However this may gall him with some check,
Cannot with safety cast him; for he's embarked
With such loud reason to the Cyprus wars,
 [...]
Though I do hate him as I do hell's pains,
 Yet, for necessity of present life,
I must show out a flag and sign of love,
Which is indeed but sign. (*Oth.*, 1.1.144-156) (emphasis added)

Iago realizes the meaning of Othello's evidence for Venice. The Venetian government cannot cast Othello out because they need, the valiant general, to win the war against Cyprus. As Iago shows, although Othello is depicted as a talented commander in terms of battles, he is merely utilized by Venetian society. Iago not only hates him but also does not respect him. When Iago remarks to Othello that others speak against Othello, Othello expresses himself:

My services which I have done the signiory
 Shall out-tongue his complaints. 'Tis yet to know-
 Which, when I know that boasting is an honour,
I shall provulgate -I fetch my life and being
From men of royal siege, and my demerits
 May speak unconnected to as proud a fortune
 As this that I have reached. (*Oth.*, 1.2.18-24) (emphasis added)

Othello is proud to be known as a brave warrior and believes that he contributes to Venetian society. In Othello's lines, "being/From men of royal siege" means being born into a noble and high position. Othello has plenty of confidence in himself. Moreover, he is innocent and honest about himself as well as about the Western people. Othello is appropriate as the hero or main character with plenty of factors that will cause him to become a tragic figure.

Brabantio is enormously angry with Othello and shows it with abusive language. However, other senators and the duke support Othello and highly esteem him as the "valiant (*Oth.*, 1.3.46; 1.3.47)" Moor. Desdemona also protects Othello earnestly and respects him with her whole heart:

That I did love the Moor to live with him,

My downright violence and storm of fortunes
May trumpet to the world. My heart's subdued
Even to the very quality of my lord.

I saw Othello's visage in him mind

And to his honours and his valiant parts

Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate. (*Oth.*, 1.3.244-250) (emphasis added)

Desdemona mentions her sincere love for Othello, and insists on "his honours and his valiant parts." In addition, the duke represents Othello to Brabantio:

If virtue no delighted beauty lack,

Your son-in-law is far more fair than black. (*Oth.*, 1.3.285-286) (emphasis added)

As the duke remarks, it is impressive that Othello's complexion is not "fair" but "black." Imtiaz Habib discusses the black people who served in the British army in those days. The black person was shown as the genetic people of Indian, African or Turkish descent. Habib states, "Shakespeare's *Othello* should be considered not just in the light of traditional sources for the play but also in the contexts of black military service in Tudor armies and generally, of the unacknowledged blacks of sixteenth century England."⁷ Habib examines the background and the existence of the black Tudor soldier. They were brought into England through the slave trade, and are called the victims of the English armies.⁸ The black people in England were cultivated by the English system in terms of discipline, language and religion. While the black people acquired intelligence, techniques and language as compelled by Westerners, the Westerners maintained an attitude of haughtiness toward the blacks. Othello is also an elite general cultivated by the Venetian system. He is not an honorable human being but the idealized tool of his Western society.

III. The Western Viewpoint of India

India has been a fairyland full of resources for Western countries. Queen Elizabeth founded The Honorable East India Company with an English Royal Charter in 1600. The company had governmental and military functions and its trade was cotton, silk, indigo dye, saltpeter and tea. The East India Company was built in Madras in 1639, in Bombay in 1668, and in Calcutta in 1690, and was governed by a few English governor generals. This company was the centre of the trade organization between India and England and served as the integrated controller in India. Through it, the resource

wealth of India was diverted to a lot of Westerners.

In the Elizabethan Era, England conducted plenty of overseas explorations for America and Asia, especially in India. The gentleman Armado who appears in Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost*, is familiar with navigation. The play reflects the social condition of the time. It is evident that the navigation story has been diffused through England. Moreover, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Titania, Queen of the Fairies, remarks:

Set your heart at rest:

The fairy land buys not the child of me.

His mother was a votress of my order;

And in the spiced Indian air, by night,

Full often hath she gossip'd by my side;

And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands,

Marking th'embarked traders on the flood:

When we have laugh'd to see the sails conceive

And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind;

Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait

Following (her womb then rich with my young squire),

Would imitate, and sail upon the land

To fetch me trifles, and return again

As from a voyage rich with merchandise.

But she, being mortal, of that boy did die;

And for her sake do I rear up her boy;

And for her sake I will not part with him. (*Mid.*, 2.1.121-137) (emphasis added)

Titania describes the Indian mother as “a votress of my order.” It is clear that in this relationship, the fairy queen, Titania is superior and the Indian mother is subordinate. Titania expresses India as having “The fairy land,” “spiced Indian air,” “Neptune's yellow sands” (Neptune is the sea god), and “th'embarked traders on the flood,”; she says, “see the sails conceive/And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind” and “As from a voyage rich with merchandise.” Titania's remarks show the flowing trade exchange with England as West and India as East. In addition, Titania mentions the Indian mother as having “her womb then rich with my young squire.” As Margo Hendricks states that India has a particular image; skin color, geography, sexuality, and religion,⁹ the image of the Indian woman implies the primitive, sexual and innocent. As the fairy queen says,

“And for her sake do I rear up her boy;/And for her sake I will not part with him,” she takes complete control of the Indian boy. This shows that England governs India at any cost.

On the other hand, regarding the Indian image, there is *Othello*. In the climactic scene, having lost his army, his loving wife and his honour, Othello speaks to the Venetians:

Soft you; a word or two before you go.
[...] Then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinable gum. Set you down this;
And say besides that in Aleppo once
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th’throat the circumcised dog
And smote him, thus. (*Oth.*, 5.2.334–357) (emphasis added)

Othello has fallen for Iago’s trap, which is his fair wife Desdemona’s love affair with Cassio, the young handsome Venetian subordinate. Othello cannot trust her. He loses his sanity and changes from valiant general into jealous monster. Othello puts Desdemona to death because of his passionate love. Before being arrested, however, Othello realizes Iago’s trap, Cassio’s innocence and Desdemona’s sincere love.

Othello describes himself as one who “Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away/Richer than all his tribe” and “Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk/Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,/I took by th’throat the circumcised dog/And smote him.” Then he stabs himself. Othello is confident of himself in terms of his birth, his talent as a warrior and his intelligence as cultivated by the West. That is, Othello, the elite Moor, has a sense of self that is different from the ordinary native Moor. He has a double differentiation: between the Western and the Moor, as well as between the cultivated Moor and the primitive Moor. Othello considers Indians and Turks as base, primitive and violent. His viewpoint is the same as the Westerner’s. Othello’s words also describe how India

has the image of resource wealth as well as the base image of inferior quality.

IV. ICS and the English Education System

As for the Western countries, Othello's existence is complicated since he has the double aspects of the valiant general and the inferior Moor. Regarding the problem of Othello, Ania Loomba, a female Indian critic, argues about the education system in India. The East India Company is actually controlled by only a few English governors since the Indian Civil Service (ICS) supported the British Empire. A position in the ICS offers assurances of wealth, intelligence and honour. To succeed on the entrance examination, made by the Westerners, brings the chance of success in Indian society. Consequently, native Indians seek to be trained in the English education system. Ania Loomba discusses the meaning of Shakespeare's *Othello* and in India:

Of course, we can read Shakespeare's play either as a passionate defence of, or as a warning against, inter-racial love, but the crucial point is that on the stage, in critical evaluations and within classrooms all over the world, its racial theme was read to bolster racist ideologies existing in different contexts — in Britain, in South Africa and India among other places. In all these places, Shakespeare's play worked to reinforce the cultural authority of not just Shakespeare, but 'Englishness.' (84-85)

Loomba mentions that Shakespeare's plays contributed to maintaining the existence of the British Empire and its "Englishness." As Loomba shows, there are clear differences between India and "Englishness." The native Indian accepted Shakespeare as a playwright or "the Bard" in England as well as a symbol of "Englishness," including English religion, discipline, language and education. Shakespeare spread through the Indian education system, mixing culture and political strategy with other subjects. India, however, had had the cast-system from ancient times, so only a certain group of people had the opportunity for an English education. In India, there existed the double differentiation as in Othello's case: between England and India, and between the elite Indian and the native Indian. Loomba depicts it as follows:

Even those literary texts that are, arguably, distant from or even critical of colonial ideologies can be made to serve colonial interests through educational systems that devalue native literatures, and by euro-centric critical practices which insist on certain Western texts being the makers of superior culture and value. The rise of

literary studies as a 'discipline' of study in British universities was in fact linked to the perceived needs of colonial administrations: English literature was instituted as formal discipline in London and Oxford only after the Indian Civil Service examination began to include a 1000 mark paper in it, on the assumption that knowledge of English literature was necessary for those who would be administering British interests. Soon after, it was also deemed important that the natives themselves be instructed in Western literature. (85)

Loomba states, "English literature was instituted as formal discipline in London and Oxford only after the Indian Civil Service examination." In addition, native Indians needed to obtain an English education to establish their elite consciousness. This system, which changed the native Indian and the cultivated Indian, has increased with the times. The elite group members have a complicated sense of self that differentiates from the Westerners and the primitive natives. This situation is similar to Othello's case as the brave general as well as the elite Moor. This is why, The Indian Othello is produced in India.

Conclusion

In colonial India, the native Indian actor was first adopted as a main character in Calcutta in 1848. Adhara admirably performed Othello but was only reluctantly accepted by the Westerners. The Indian Othello could not be easily accepted because of his different complexion. Shakespeare's Othello is depicted as a valiant general with talent, as the warrior had intelligence cultivated by the Western world. However, Othello's tragedy did not stop because of his ability; it increased the pace of his ruin because of his race, as a Moor.

In India, there exists plenty of Indian Othello. They are willing to acquire an English education in order to be promoted to ICS. Consequently, the Indian Othello is spread throughout India with double differences: between the Westerners as superior and the Indians as subordinate in colonial society, and between the elite Indian natives and the primitive Indian natives. The native actor Adhara's Othello represents this complicated discrimination. After the production was staged in 1848, other native performers appeared in Indian theatre, and translations and adaptations of Shakespeare's works were created in sequence. Thus, Barry's hybrid Indian/English *Othello* revolutionized the Indian Theatre world. Moreover, Barry gave a representation of the elite Indian people

who agonized over their positions in colonial India and were victims of the cunning strategy of the English education system.

(やまだ みゆき・言語文学専攻)

Notes

- ¹ Parmita Kapadia, "The Politics of Choice: English Language Shakespeare Productions in India," *The Upstart Crow* 21 (2001): 105.
- ² Sudipto Chatterjee and Jyotsna G. Singh, "Moor or Less? The Surveillance of *Othello*, Calcutta 1848," *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, eds. Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (London: Routledge, 1999) 77.
- ³ Chatterjee and Singh 78.
- ⁴ Chatterjee and Singh 78.
- ⁵ Chatterjee and Singh 79.
- ⁶ Chatterjee and Singh 79.
- ⁷ Polmtiaz Habib, "Othello, Sir Peter Negro, and the Blacks of Early Modern England: Colonial Inscription and Postcolonial excavation," *LIT* 9 (1998): 15.
- ⁸ Habib 18.
- ⁹ Margo Hendricks, "Obscured by Dreams': Race, Empire, and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47.1 (1996): 43.

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