

CHAPTER 3

Wrestling with Othello: A Study of Charles Marowitz' An Othello

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Chapter III

Wrestling with Othello

It is not for us to regard the skin, but the soul. If that be innocent, pure, holy, the blots of an outside cannot set us off from the love of him who hath said, Behold, thou art fair...if that be foul and black, it is not in the power of an angelic brightness of our hide, to make us other than a loathesome eye-sore to the Almighty.

(qtd.in Huntley)

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.

Co-founder of Encore Magazine and a regular columnist on Swans.com, the Cultural-Political bi-weekly, Marowitz is also a regular contributor to publications such as The New York Times, The London Times, Theatre Week

Magazine and American Theatre Magazine. He continued to be the lead critic on the Los Angeles Herald Examiner until the paper's demise in the late 1980s. He has to his credit over two dozen books, a few among them being, *How to Stage a Play*, *Make a Fortune*, *Win a Tony and Become a Theatrical Icon* and *The Other Chekhov*, the first English language biography of the legendary actor and theorist, Michael Chekhov. Other works include *Confessions of a Counterfeit Critic*, *The Act of Being: Towards a Theory of Acting*, *Recycling Shakespeare* and *Roar of the Canon*, which is a challenging exploration of Shakespearean production-theory, making use of first hand material from the dazzling classicist scholar, Jan Kott. He is one of the most critical and incisive Shakespearean scholars to emerge in the past century.

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)

As a New Yorker who has been living in London for sometime now, he sees no reason why he should return to America. Perhaps surprisingly, but he says he has found in England, "a great antipathy to experiment of any sort and a real suspicion of anyone who consciously moves in another direction to try out different things." This is one reason why he often thinks of returning to the US. But he has become so popular, in England and Norway, for his interpretations of texts that are national myths, that it keeps him from eventually returning. He declares: "Unfortunately the American theatre has no classics. There is no American writer who is so rooted into the American experience that one could use their material in mythic ways." Therefore, for this reason alone, it is probable that Charles Marowitz will remain in exile.

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.

With *The Marowitz Shakespeare* (a collection of adaptation of *Macbeth*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Measure for Measure* *Hamlet*, and *The Merchant of Venice*), Marowitz adapts Shakespeare's plays for the late twentieth century. He has never tried to claim that what he presents is Shakespeare. It is rather the Marowitz Shakespeare or his translation of the original. He asks himself a few radical questions like whether it is possible to express one's view of *Hamlet* without the help of narrative; whether there isn't some smear of Hamlet somewhere in our collective unconscious which makes him familiar even though we have never read the play or seen it performed; whether a well known

play can be reconstructed and redistributed so as to make a new work of art. In other words, if the play were a precious old vase which shattered into a thousand pieces, can one glue the pieces together into a new shape and yet retain the spirit of the original. These questions are rhetorical for Marowitz because they demand an affirmative response. Michael Scott in *Shakespeare and the Modern Dramatist* asserts about Marowitz:

His Shakespeare is one which must react against the well-worn formulas and cliches of theatre and scholarship representing the myths which Shakespeare himself culled and refashioned for his theatre. Where the academic Shakespearean industry has gone wrong has been in seeing Shakespeare as an end in himself. The myths can live on and be presented in radically new, exciting and appropriate ways. (105)

According to Scott, 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).

Leslie Fiedler has observed that miscegenation is not a notable factor in Shakespeare's play as the concept had, historically, not been defined in the early seventeenth century.

It would be a mistake to think of *Othello* as trading on the kind of horror at the mating of a black male and a white female commonly felt by, say, American audiences of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Othello* may, indeed, end with precisely the scene of erotic black-white murder which has haunted the American mind all the way...The seeds are there , perhaps even the first sprouts , but only when fostered by

‘scientific’ anthropology can the miscegenation-madness attain full growth. (qtd. in Scott 112)

Marowitz himself in *An Othello Casebook* tells us how “the play was written within a period of about two and a half weeks.” It was his “first literary effort, literally dashed out within three weeks” and “it got a fairly interesting reception. The original idea was simply to edit Shakespeare’s text, cut it about in a certain way, in order to bring out the black-white conflict theme”. But finally, “two-thirds of the play turned out to be original writing and one-third Shakespeare”(Marowitz, Being163). Marowitz had read Elridge Cleaver and Malcolm X and was caught up with the fifteen years of black revolution in America. So he admits that the political ideas in the play are derived entirely from Malcolm X’s ideas. He 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. He is very apologetic as he says:

All the way through the writing of the play, and the rehearsal of the play, there was this dogging fear of 'what right has this white New York Jewish intellectual to write about these things that don't directly pertain to him?' They do in the sense that I'm an American, but they don't in that I've not suffered the things that are dramatized in this play. (165)

But Marowitz confesses:

Othello for me is a melodrama, but it happens to be a melodrama with a central black character, which creates impressions and ideas about black characters in today's world. I think the same thing is true about Shylock, and one thing that came out of work on Othello was the realization that it was possible to do something along similar lines with the character of Shylock. (165)

His adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* was born out of a sincere desire to release Shylock from the "terrible prison he is in, as a kind of comic character with tragic implications" (165).

A much-debated question is why Shakespeare chose a black man, Othello, as the hero of one of his greatest tragedies. Shakespeare had portrayed the conventional negative stereotype of the Moor (Aaron) in *Titus Andronicus*. But what made him break away from that image in his later play is not known. 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 an export to the colonies of European literature and language as a part of their policy of cultural domination but it also enabled the colonized groups to revise and remake his 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 subjects 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. But it was only in the 1980s that writers like Ngugi began to draw the attention of Anglo-American critics with the formation of post-colonial approaches in Western literary studies.

In Shakespeare studies, post-colonial criticism often stresses historical sources drawn from travel and discovery narratives which record the contact histories of the early modern period. The Europeans were wont to define their own sense of national and cultural identity in discovering other lands for trade and influence. They also had to differentiate between themselves and the non-European others they came across. New geographical knowledge which grew out of this early modern interest in mercantile or trading enterprises made the Europeans keenly aware of the changing geographical, racial and cultural boundaries. Arising from these historical concerns, post-colonial criticism is specifically interested in mapping and investigating the many shifts in the concept of race and classes of racial difference – often associated with culture, religion and nationality, from the early modern period to more recent colonial and post-colonial moments of political and economic struggle.

From a post-colonial view, images of black Africans or Moors in early modern English culture supply a decisive background for understanding

Othello's complex role in the Venetian society of Shakespeare's play. A highly decorated and respected general is considered an unsuitable match for a Venetian senator's young daughter. Throughout the play, the many derogatory references to Othello's race offer a clear explanation. Iago is seen to use animal imagery to refer to the supposedly unnatural marriage between Othello and Desdemona. The play's first scene shows Iago and Roderigo standing outside Brabantio's house flinging out racial slurs against the sexual union of a white woman and a Moorish man. They tell him that "an old black ram/Is tugging your white ewe" (*Oth.I.i.85-6*) and also that Othello and Desdemona are "making the beast with two backs" (*I.i.113*). This crude language reduces both Desdemona and Othello to animals and plays on the fear that there is something alarming and shockingly bestial about the sexual union of a black man and a fair woman. Her whiteness is honoured as something prized that can be soiled by the touch of the "lascivious Moor" (*I.i.123*). Brabantio too accuses Othello of wooing his daughter by witchcraft.

BRABANTIO.

She is abused, stolen from me, and corrupted

By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks;

For nature so preposterously to err,

Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,

Sans witchcraft could not. (*An Oth.263*)

But for that it would be unnatural for her to "run from her guardage to the sooty bosom of such a thing as thou" (*An Oth.260*). Othello is referred to as

a revolting object in Act Five when Lodovico shuns from the corpses of Othello and Desdemona lying on the marriage bed. He orders, “The object poisons sight/ Let it be hid.”(*Oth.V.ii.364-5*), as though it were a sight that must be hidden. What is most tragic is the fact that Othello himself internalizes a few of the racist stereotypes employed by Iago and Brabantio as when he identifies with images of the “Turbaned Turk” and “Circumcised dog” at the end of the play (*V.ii.358,360*). Until the 1960s criticism of *Othello* viewed the tragedy from Brabantio’s viewpoint, where an interracial marriage was considered a sudden change of nature and tragically condemned to failure. According to some critics the play cannot be defined as a true tragedy because it dramatizes an inviolable taboo in nineteenth-century England: a white woman in the embrace of a black man.

Post-colonial criticism provides a historical interpretation for the treatment of *Othello* by examining the complexities of early modern racial attitudes and the associations between definite races and religions and their physical features in particular. If racial attitudes are analysed historically, we often find that the Welsh, the Irish, the Turks, the Jews, Africans, Indians are all depicted as different from one another, but at the same time distinctively different from the English. This distinguishing factor which is observed in culture is reflected in theatre too. Writings of the Renaissance period are full of examples of light-skinned Moors and also Moors who have converted to Christianity. The association of blackness and Moorishness is common in

literature as is the association of Moors and Islam, even though all Muslims are not seen as black.

Despite the fact that Europeans, through trade and industry, have gained knowledge of other races and cultures, they are still baffled about racial and religious specifications. The European tendency to demonize 'black' races of people who looked different from them is increasingly conspicuous in their writings. Othello is led into believing in his own inferiority by Iago. How a dramatist like Shakespeare could imagine that Iago could manipulate Othello, is better understood if we analyse these historical conditions. When Shakespeare was writing Othello by the early seventeenth century knowledge of Africa was far more detailed than it had been before. By then, the dark skin of the Africans and their strange and unfamiliar habits and customs singled them out in the English imagination as an entirely different class of humanity. Hence it is not surprising that Iago's allusions to Othello's black inferiority was well understood by the audience of the day. It was the visual and verbal images that prevailed in the popular imagination of Elizabethan England than helped them do so.

A realisation of how post-colonial criticism accommodates historical explanations for Othello's tragedy, in terms of his status as an outsider in Renaissance Venice brings us to the presumption that the meanings of Shakespeare's plays are not basically constant. Neither are they part of a lasting, common human experience. Post-colonial criticism specially brings our attention to the part played by Shakespeare's plays on different historical

occasions pertaining to particular political struggles in contemporary times. Hence the urge to historicize extends to both the past and present.

When interracial relationships were legally forbidden, post-colonial approaches show us how racial themes in *Othello* were suppressed in apartheid South Africa. Especially in the mid-1980s, during the peak of apartheid in South Africa, *Othello* became a ground on which the power struggles between the white rulers and the black subjects were brought to a close, thereby giving a current urgency to the predicament of an imaginary Renaissance figure. The white South African critics almost always evaded *Othello* as the subject of race was taboo at the time. But when they did write about the play, they normally kept away from its concern with colour. Instead, they concentrated on the play's interpretation as a tragedy of jealousy. In short, it is argued that the racism inherent in South African criticism of *Othello* "is a part of the Western critical tradition, represented by Coleridge among others. This is the very tradition that many critics uphold as transcendent and timeless in its humanity"(Singh 495).

Similarly, the apparently casual role of the Prince of Morocco in yet another Shakespearean play, *The Merchant of Venice*, also acquires a larger historical significance from this perspective. He is just, one of the three suitors who come to Belmont to solve the riddle of the caskets. Portia's and the audience's dismissal of Morocco seems to imply the 'otherness' also invoked by Othello the Moor in another Shakespearean play also set in Venice. This fore-fronting of the role of the Prince of Morocco helps post-colonial criticism

look at Shakespeare's plays afresh. Moreover, by placing these works within the European history of trade and colonisation, this method of inquiry has altered the scene of these dramatic works – peopled more by characters hitherto in the shadowy margins of European critical consciousness, “Moors”, “Jews”, “Indians” and others. Another example of this fact is the radical reading of the minor character of the changeling “Indian boy” in the Shakespearean comedy *‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’*. When both Oberon and Titania have a fight over him, all we know of him is that his mother was an Indian votaress who died at his birth. He is not listed in the *dramatis personae*, yet the performance history of the play shows that he has been played by actors of different ages. The presence of the Indian boy on stage seemed to offer an exotic touch. The role of the Indian changeling boy highlighted images of India in the play. A post-colonial perspective brought Shakespeare's European fairyland nearer to European trading and colonizing interests. At the same time India, according to popular imaginings, was thought of as a place of fabulous wealth and exoticism and also as a land to be conquered and occupied.

In the light of criticism that has accumulated over three hundred years, it is necessary to know what a Moor is. The play was, particularly, in the Restoration period known as the “The Moor of Venice”. We are not certain whether it has parallels with Shakespeare's other nominations like “Prince of Denmark”, “Merchant of Venice” and so on. In Elizabethan England Moors were generally taken to be blackamoors. However, it is possible to understand

Othello only if we recognize his foreignness or strangeness. He himself talks of it to Brabantio. He says:

I spoke of most disastrous chances,
 Of moving accidents by flood and field
 Of hair-breadth scapes i' th'imminent- deadly breach,
 Of being taken by the insolent foe
 And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence
 And portance in my traveler's history;
 Wherein of anters vast and deserts idle,
 Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven,
 It was my hint to speak--such was my process-
 And of the Cannibals that each other eat,
 The anthropophagi, and men whose heads
 Do grow beneath their shoulders. (*Oth.*I.iii.133-44)

White is symbolically represented as virtuous, open and good and even though Othello is abused for his blackness, he is essentially good. Iago is white on the outside and black inside. Shakespeare must have been using colour deliberately in a metaphorical way to distinguish between appearances and reality. Because in Shakespeare's time black suggested treachery, evil, darkness and night, and white suggested radiance, daylight and openness. But morality cannot be simplified in that way. Othello's soul, particularly from the

middle of the play onward, is savage. The real conflict is “between the noble Moor and the rude savage” (Marowitz, *Roar*40). The psychological movement of the play, especially when Iago begins to provoke Othello’s jealousy, is between his primitive instincts and his civilized nature. He moves from “sublime and lyrical poetry” to “venting a maniacal urge for destruction”(41).

In a conversation with Marowitz, Jan Kott avers:

Shakespeare is constantly reminding us of the more primitive roots that lie beneath the cultivated general. Jealousy was a common ingredient in Elizabethan drama and can be found in many characters in many plays so there’s nothing particularly distinctive about that – but in *Othello*, it is expressed in an extremely violent form of behavior. (41)

Shakespeare strongly underscores his primitive nature in the final scenes of the play. A primitive person with a barbaric disposition is civilized only until a certain breaking point is reached. The true nature of Othello is, without doubt, a combination of both.

Iago’s lack of motivation is, for many critics, the central fault in the play. From the post-modernist perspective, “a villain is much more credible as a villain if he has been created genetically than if he is the product of education and environment” (44). This is the only Shakespearean tragedy in which the wrong-doer does not pay with his life. What happens off-stage is not important,

but the fact remains that he is not killed on stage, but remains alive at the end of the play.

An inescapable strand of racism runs throughout *Othello* and both Brabantio and Iago abuse Othello for his colour. But though contemporary knowledge of racial conflict is not directly reflected in the play, one doubts whether the play does speak of racial issues today. Jan Kott suggests that the racial problems portrayed in *Othello* are not dissimilar to those depicted in *The Merchant of Venice* – which is anti-Semitic. Shakespeare is thought to have “consciously brought together the attraction of black and white” (46) to mean the attraction of one skin-colour to another. This is, perhaps, true because in the very first lines of Iago, Shakespeare “posits the sexual allusion between the two races” (46).

Anglo-American literary studies of the last two hundred years proffered a Shakespeare who acclaimed the superiority of the civilized races and what is more, the colonial educationists and administrators made use of this Shakespeare to fortify cultural and racial hierarchies. During the colonial period, he became the spirit of Englishness and a gauge of humanity itself. Hence the meanings of Shakespeare’s plays were drawn from and used to secure colonial authority.

Scholars and artists from the colonised world reacted to Shakespeare in many ways. Sometimes they joined their colonial masters to commend him, at other times they questioned his cultural authority. They also appropriated

Shakespeare by providing new meanings and new versions of his work. In current years, Shakespearean critics and intellectuals operating within post-colonial studies have begun to examine the ways in which the colonial and racial discourses of early twentieth century England might have moulded Shakespeare's work. They have also tried to analyse the processes by which the performance and study of Shakespeare became a colonial battlefield. Thus Post-Colonial Shakespeare is a comparatively new endeavour which deals with "the overlaps, tensions, as well as possibilities of a dialogue, between Shakespearean and post-colonial studies" (Loomba and Orkin 2). Reinterpreting Shakespeare's plays, therefore, at least to some critics, became part of the business of redefining and changing our own world. It became essential to discover how Shakespeare operated in modern classrooms, in films, television and theatre and how his cultural supremacy was a subject of new discourses. Questions of colonialism and race in relation to Shakespeare came up with the re-readings of Renaissance culture and power. English colonialism which had been considered as a backdrop for Shakespeare's *Tempest* is now regarded as central to the play's thematic and formal concerns, thereby forming not just a background but one of its "dominant discursive contexts" (Barker and Hulme 198).

It is important to explore how our attitudes to race differ from those of Shakespeare's contemporaries. It is also crucial to examine what part Shakespeare's works play in the diffusion of ideas about race and cultural

difference. As Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin reveal in *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*

Literary texts that were written a long time ago but which circulate powerfully in our own lives constantly mediate between the 'then' and the 'now'...stage as well as classroom histories of Shakespeare's plays reveal how racial ideologies continued to shape the ways the plays were interpreted, taught and produced, but also reveal oppositional practices, appropriations of Shakespeare and contests over the meaning of the plays. (4-5)

The relationship between the past and the present has acquired new significance in the light of new readings of early modern colonialisms. For example, some critics have opined that current meanings of race and colonialism cannot be applied to the past. However, it is possible that in early twentieth century Europe "blackness" may not have been the most prominent sign of race. Post-colonial criticism in relation to Shakespeare helps to bring together early modern Europe and our contemporary world. It tries to link the Shakespearean text 'then' with the later histories of Shakespeare.

Another important factor that is relevant today is that the colonized people have managed to create spaces for themselves from which they can speak. The question is whether they speak in their own voices or "in accents borrowed from their masters" (7). According to Loomba and Orkin "Colonial Masters imposed their value system through Shakespeare, and in response

colonized people often answered back in Shakespearean accents”(7). Shakespeare has pervaded much of the non-English speaking world and today is the most performed playwright in the world. This is a fact that is often taken as evidence of Shakespeare’s universal genius. Hybridity is one term that is central to post-colonial criticism and which is, to a great extent, used to identify the range of physical and psychological mixings engendered by colonial encounters. Many post-colonial critics consider hybridity as a potentially radical state that enables colonial and post-colonial subjects to subvert the binaries and rigid boundaries enforced by colonial discourses. Hence Shakespeare’s play not only generates hybrid subjects but is itself hybridized by the various appropriations of his work. It may be argued that “any act of reading and performing Shakespeare in the later twentieth century generates multiple levels of hybridity” (8).

Race, culture and religion, and for that matter, even nationality are overlapping concepts that draw their meaning from one another. Caliban, Othello and Shylock act out the pressures of interracial, inter-cultural and interreligious confrontations. The relationship between Prospero and Caliban is used by Octavio Mannoni to indicate the psychological differences between the colonizers and the colonized (10). Likewise, the South African psychoanalyst Wulf Sachs used Freud’s concept of “Hamletism” to imply that there are no distinctions between black and white psyches. Thus, Loomba and Orkin conclude that “Shakespeare provides the language for experiencing racial difference and human sameness as well as colonial hybridities” (10).

Apparently, Othello has an African past but he is also identified with the Turks he goes to fight. The notion of “race” varies in meaning over the years as its interpretations also differ within each historical context. Both colour and religion are essential features of racial, national and cultural difference. In fact, religion seems to acquire greater significance with regard to Turks just as colour does with regard to Africans. Shakespeare is the ground for colonial and post-colonial confrontations, but these confrontations can be understood only with respect to particular social, political and established histories.

As we both found at a seminar in Chicago a couple of years ago, we are always asked questions about Shakespeare and race in the Indian or South African classroom, but were told very little about similar issues in the American or European classroom. (17)

Emily Bartels in an essay on *Othello* holds the view that *Othello* is not a play about racial supremacy, but on the contrary, outlines an agreeably integrated subject. Bartels reveals that English colonialization of Africa was not an early modern occurrence, but it is also true that both Africans and blackness carried no negative meanings in early twentieth-century England. Prejudice against blackness in *Othello* is restricted to Iago and the other characters whom the play denounces. Iago’s prejudice is “deeply personal... motiveless and malignant as he is” (Bartels 62). Renaissance travelogues show that “Moors” existed not only in Africa but also in Turkey, India, the Moluccas and elsewhere. The term, then, primarily meant a religion – Islam, rather than a colour. *Othello* is almost always read in terms of blackness of its main

character. But Shakespeare portrays Othello along ethnic lines – as a Moor who also belongs to Venice. There he is not a victim of racial prejudice. His Moorishness and his status in Venice are the two aspects on which the entire action of the play rests. It is not just Iago and Brabantio, but Othello himself who makes allusions to his blackness and status as outsider. As Loomba suggests it is “Othello’s military competence, his rhetorical flamboyance and his self-assurance” that “catalyse his downfall” (150). *Othello* may not have been originally intended to be a play about race but its history has made it so. Carol Neely also is of the opinion that Othello should not be read as a black but as a “mestizo” – a hybrid (Neely 305). Hence, Loomba concludes:

Both Bartels and Neely posit Othello’s ‘hybridity’ as a way of stressing his relative agency and power. For both though, hybridity is *counterposed* to blackness and agency to the force of European domination, and these terms become the critical means of underplaying the force of racial difference in the play- both in its own context and now. (150)

In order to analyse the Shakespearean confrontations with non-English players and intellectuals, it seemed necessary to move beyond European depictions of *Othello*. Ania Loomba shares her experience of having been able to include in a course on “Shakespearean appropriations”, a breathtaking adaptation of *Othello* into Kathakali, a dance-drama form from Kerala. The production worked wonders in two ways – it definitely did something to Shakespeare but what it did to Kathakali was even more noteworthy.

Kathakali, like Noh and Kabuki, which evolved at about the same time as Shakespearean drama, is a highly formal style of theatre. Kathakali was first devised to perform stories from the Hindu epic Ramayana. It is a story-play - hybrid that draws upon other earlier arts like Kutiyattam, Taiyyam and Kalarippayat. Its dramatic codes are based on Bharata's Natyashastra which is considered to be the encyclopedia of Indian dramaturgy and theatrical modes. From Kutiyattam are drawn the heavy and elaborate costumes, mask-like make-up, and a complicated code of gestures or mudras. There are over 500 facial, eye or hand gestures which are used to communicate to the audience. Taiyyam is a religious theatre from which Kathakali has borrowed the theme of struggles between good and demonic figures. The *Othello* production portrays Iago and Othello as such archetypes. Kalarippayat, the popular martial art form of Kerala, supplies Kathakali its choreography and strict methods of training. The International Centre for Kathakali is a state-sponsored institution which acts as a patron for Kathakali. The Kathakali *Othello* produced by this centre, is over two hours long and includes only five scenes: the scene where Roderigo & Iago meet for the first time; the Senate scene; Othello's and Desdemona's meeting in Cyprus which is a long scene including Cassio's meeting with Desdemona and her pleading with Othello on Cassio's behalf; Iago snatching the handkerchief from Emilia and sowing seeds of suspicion in Othello's mind and finally the bedchamber scene. The original play would go on for twelve hours or more as Kathakali performances normally do. This production

bypasses all questions and histories of difference in its potent appropriation of *Othello* without violating its own characteristic codes of signification.

Othello's origins and Moorishness have been central to the debate that has prevailed these four hundred years as to what shade of black he is. But in the Kathakali *Othello*, Othello is neither a Moor nor a black man but a Hindu Warrior. The contemporary ideologies of belonging and exclusion in India do not colour his identity. Thus, Ania Loomba points out:

While one post-colonial revision restlessly searches the globe for histories and motifs which foreground the question of difference, the other uses centuries of stagecraft to reach out and mould difference in its own image. As part of the post-colonial appropriation of Shakespeare, these silences disappoint us but they speak eloquently about the dynamics of the post-colonial evolution of Kathakali. (155)

The International Centre for Kathakali which was founded in 1960 aimed at approaching the particular problems involved in adapting Kathakali to the modern stage. Plays like *Mary Magdalene*, *David and Goliath* and *Salome* which fall outside the traditional Kathakali corpus have been produced by this Centre. This was done in an attempt "to forge traditional, regional traditions in to a national...conception of the Indian Arts"(155). The most radical change in Kathakali is the introduction of women actors, which until recently was, like Shakespeare's plays in their original context acted out solely by men. Sadanam

Srinathan who played the role of Desdemona feels that “real women do not have the ‘energy’ to enact true femininity”. Moreover, “female roles require special training” (159). The highly non-realistic, exaggerated style of Kathakali with its mask-like make-up and heavy costumes literally remould the stage body, thereby establishing a theatrical code where impersonation is displayed.

The production, according to Sadanam Balakrishnan, the writer, director and chief actor of *Othello*, was an experiment which would take some time to reach maturity. Each time the play was performed a new scene was added. He hoped to find a gratifying and productive meeting of the Indian form and the English play within a year of its production. The challenge for him lay in working within the uncompromising conventions of Kathakali and bending them to narrate an alien story. He was interested in playing upon the rules of Kathakali rather than producing a new version of *Othello*.

Othello's difference, whether it was of colour or religion, was totally erased in this production. He was not just a black man but a Moor. Though in early twentieth-century England “Moor” was used as an umbrella term for non-Europeanness, it initially meant “Muslim”. It was unimaginable for Kathakali to adopt a Muslim protagonist, perhaps, as radical as it was for Shakespeare to stage a black hero. However, the Kathakali *Othello* does not provide us with a new interpretation of the play. Instead, the conventions and histories of Kathakali interact with, subvert or simply skirt those of Shakespeare's play. The production is not anticolonial nor does it play upon the colonial histories of

the play. But it is worth noting that the Kathakali *Othello* “provincializes” Shakespeare (163).

An Othello is a collage and Marowitz defines theatrical collage in *Recycling Shakespeare*. He says:

Theatrical collage (as in *The Marowitz Hamlet*, *A Macbeth*, *An Othello*) combines speed, discontinuity and dramatic juxtaposition. Speed enables it to deliver a maximum amount of information in a minimum amount of time. Discontinuity permits it to express interior meanings that in more conventional structures are revealed through the more plodding movements of unfolding psychology. Dramatic juxtapositions enable it to convey contrast and contradiction in such a way as to provide more dramatic information than is possible through sequential development. The effect of this swift, fragmentary method is to generate a surreal style that communicates experience from a subjective standpoint, thereby shifting the focus of events from an exterior to an interior reality. (Marowitz, *Recycling* 32)

In other words, collage is a fusion of disparate things where each individual piece is made up of recognizable elements but whose overall effect is strange and disorienting. Marowitz goes on to say:

Discontinuity ... is nothing more than a gratuitous stylistic device. A film, for example, that wilfully uses flashbacks and

flash-forwards to convey what is essentially a progressive storyline is not really a departure from conventional narrative form ... The dramatic value of discontinuity, particularly in the case of classics, is that it provides a useful by-product of the continuous narrative from which it has been derived. An effective way of retelling a story whose main strands are generally known is to skim its surface, re-angle its moving parts and abstract it just enough to provide a new and unexpected vantage point on the original. (32-3)

Collage techniques in Shakespeare are confined to plays that have become familiar to the public through frequent repetition. "The effect of novelty is," Marowitz says, "at one and the same time, the greatest strength of collage and its most treacherous pitfall" (33). The most arresting features of the late twentieth century experience are speed, fragmentation and a combination of antithetical styles, so it seems obvious that theatrical collage will, in a few years' time, do away with Aristotelian structure once and for all. No dramatist will think of developing a theme through a series of narrative. He will, probably, combine contrasting pieces and concentrate on the height of dramatic effect to be had from the juxtaposition of its various parts.

Marowitz was quite surprised at the critical reaction to *An Othello* which, contrary to his expectation, was quite encouraging. He was only annoyed at the people who, whenever someone experiments with Shakespeare, habitually make comparisons between experiments with Shakespeare and the

original play as though there was some kind of competition going on between him and Shakespeare. Marowitz wanted to say things that one could not say using the original play. It was much too clear that nobody was challenging Shakespeare. What he did in *An Othello* was to take certain segments, certain threads from the play and move them in other directions. It was irrelevant to analyse whether that was better than Shakespeare.

In *'The Act of Being: Towards a Theory of Acting*, Marowitz contemplates different levels of action regarding the staging of *Othello*. He was only too aware of the contemporary relevance of the play. In the first level, he thought:

Actors playing in Shakespeare's *Othello* are confronted with a threat when a maverick appears in their midst. All are concerned, but the greatest threat is to the actor playing Othello, for the black actor usurping the role of Iago gradually makes him realize that his performance is an integral political factor in a so-called classic which has been playing in the same way for almost four hundred years. (178)

As author-cum-director Marowitz supposes that on the second level:

The characters in Shakespeare's play gradually become detached from their context. Characters like Iago, Desdemona and Othello, apart from being *dramatis personae* in Shakespeare's work, are also characters in the received world of literature. In a sense, they

are alienated by tradition for, so powerfully they have been delineated by the past, they almost exist as characters... in their own right. On this level, these ‘personages’ comment upon certain implications in the play which gave them birth - like children who have grown up and are able to see their parents and place of origin with a new objectivity. (178)

And on the third level, “Othello operates in an imposed political context which alters his character and compels him to justify his action in terms of the black power struggle” (178). As a director Marowitz believes:

All of these levels intermingle. They should not be clarified or separated. They should intertwine. The play proper - that is, some kind of straight rendition of Shakespeare’s play *Othello* – is the necessary foundation for all of these accretions. Some fundamental part of the performance must be a conventional rendition of Shakespeare’s work – not as parody or satire, but as it might be in a sober, respectable classical production. (179)

Othello, as one would suppose, is one of Shakespeare’s most unusual tragedies. It is more like *Romeo and Juliet*, “a love story about two people whose love ends tragically” (Howard 424). Feminists have tried to delve deeper into the gender and racial dimensions of the play. Looking at it from a feminist viewpoint, *Othello* is about “a man – not a very young man- who seduces an extremely young woman, ...assuming that he is to be her master and that she

will be subservient to him ... a very old fashioned patriarchal view of both women and marriage”(424).Under the circumstances, he reserves the right to kill her if she is unfaithful to him or asserts her independence. Even though he is plunged into an agony of guilt when he eventually realises that Desdemona is innocent, his earlier words – “Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men” (Oth.V.ii.6) proves that had she been guilty he would have been perfectly entitled to take her life.

The exceptionally powerful passion that Othello and Desdemona have for one another is not, at first, affected by the differences in background and skin colour. Having rejected all the “curled darlings” (I.ii.68), the fashionable young men of Venice, and fixed her love on Othello, she overcomes the objections of her angry father and accepts him as her man. She proclaims, “I saw Othello’s visage in his mind” (I.iii.250) by which she means that it was “his inward qualities of courage, martial prowess and leadership” that attracted her to him and “not the superficiality of his outward looks” (Howard 424). Othello, in turn, loves Desdemona and finds in her the singular passion of his life.

Desdemona is a bold, outspoken woman who steals away from her father’s house to marry Othello. She even appears in the Venetian Senate to testify to her love and asks if she could accompany Othello to Cyprus on his military mission. Her boldness is deliberately misinterpreted by Iago, Othello’s lieutenant, and a walking encyclopaedia of base thoughts. He goads Othello into thinking that Desdemona has defied her father and so she might deceive

him too (*Oth.*III,iii.208) Further, he leads Othello to think that because Desdemona has married a man not of her country, she has perverse erotic tastes and excessive sexual desire(III.iii.232-43). Similarly, he impels Othello to distrust Desdemona's opinions regarding Cassio. Hence when she advocates for Cassio, Othello is made to believe that it is a sign of her love for Cassio.

Why is Iago able to convince Othello about his readings of Desdemona? The answer is simple: Iago adopts "the voice of worldly common sense" when he speaks about women, as though it goes without saying, that whatever he says is true. Reading through an anti-feminist lens, Desdemona's unusual qualities of courage, clear-sightedness and verbal expertise is turned into marks of whoredom by Iago. Bianca, one of the play's three women, is an unmarried woman who has a crush on Cassio. Even though there is no indication anywhere in the text that she is attached to a number of men simultaneously, she "stands for the non-wife, the sexually unchaste whore"(Howard425). Othello is made to overhear a conversation between Iago and Cassio and confuse Desdemona with Bianca (IV.i.72-202) in one of the most important symbolic scenes of the play. Actually they are discussing Bianca but Othello is deceived into thinking that the topic of their conversation is Desdemona. He begins to doubt his wife's chastity. This confusion is complicated further by Iago's clever manipulation of the key object in *Othello* – the handkerchief - Othello once gave Desdemona. The play's meaning is dependent on the course of this handkerchief. Desdemona uses it to soothe Othello's "jealously throbbing head"(Howard425)in Act Three. When he throws it aside, this

handkerchief is retrieved by Emilia, who gives it to her husband, Iago, who in turn drops it in Cassio's chamber. Cassio, finally, gives it to Bianca to copy out the strawberry pattern with which it is embroidered. This is how Bianca is seen carrying the handkerchief in Act Four.

Feminists have explored the multiple significances of this handkerchief. It can symbolize the bond between them, viewing it as a gift from Othello to Desdemona, but he is partly responsible for destroying the bond by throwing it aside. Jean E. Howard thinks:

The handkerchief is important not only as a sign of an abstract bond, but as a material object in its own right. It is, for instance, the kind of household object over which a good wife was to exercise managerial control...When Othello accuses Desdemona of losing the handkerchief, he is accusing her, in essence, of ceasing to be a good housewife and so of becoming a sexually and economically improvident whore. (425)

The stories that Othello tells of the origins of the handkerchief is important in itself. He talks of it as a gift from his father to his mother (*Oth.V.ii. 222-3*). He also claims that it has magical properties and was given to his mother by an Egyptian sorceress (*.III.iii. 53-73*). Of these two accounts, the second account is read as a sign of the rational Othello "degenerating into a superstitious barbarian" (Howard 426) under the heat of jealousy. The calm and composed Othello who enters the play is, by the middle of the play, thoroughly

disoriented so that Iago can even insinuate to his face about there being something unnatural in Desdemona's affection for him. He says of her:

Not to affect many proposed matches
 Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
 Where to we see when all things nature tends
 Foh, one may smell in such a will most rank,
 Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural!
 But pardon me. I do not in position
 Distinctly speak of her, though I may fear
 Her will, recoiling to her better judgement,
 May fall to match you with her country forms
 And happily repent. (III .iii.231-40)

Iago focuses Desdemona as a creature of self-will who is unnatural in her choice of a husband who is not of her own complexion. Othello begins to doubt her fidelity and his own worth - whether his age, his blackness or his lack of Venetian manners make him unattractive (III.iii.265-7). The tragedy of Othello is, thus, potentially fuelled by the presumption that the union of black and white is unnatural and also that every outspoken woman is essentially unchaste. But as the plot unravels, there is the clear contrast between a Desdemona who is symbolised as “an icon of purity and martyred virtue” and

an Othello who reveals himself as “more irrational and cruel”(Howard 427). Gender and race are set, terrifying, at odds and from a feminist point of view even Desdemona cannot be vindicated because she is in the latter half of the play, increasingly stripped of agency. She endures Othello’s wrath patiently even when he strikes her in public. Her contemplation of death makes her sing “Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve” (*Oth.* IV.iii. 52) are lines through which she expresses her own acceptance of Othello’s cruelty to her, an old song about a woman abandoned by her lover. And after she has been strangled, she momentarily revives to declare herself guiltless of any crime. When Emilia asks Desdemona who has killed her, she responds by assuming responsibility for her own murder and says “Nobody, I myself. Farewell (V.ii.127).

It is argued that in Renaissance tragedy good women are often characterised as “long-suffering martyrs” (Howard 427). The transformation that Desdemona undergoes towards the end of the play brings her close to the archetypal picture of the good wife who is chaste, silent and obedient. The Desdemona at the beginning of the play is not such a martyr. Her transformation is complete in the scene where she asks Emilia if she would sleep with a man who was not her husband. Desdemona, of course, declares she would not but Emilia, more down-to-earth, declares:

Marry, I would not do such a thing for a joint ring, nor for measures of lawn, nor for gowns, petticoats, nor caps, nor any petty exhibition; but for all the whole world? Ud’s pity, who

would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch?

(*Oth.* IV.iii.73-7)

The two women, Desdemona and Emilia, are contrasted in this scene and some feminists prefer the realistic and sensible waiting woman to the “idealised virtue of the martyred heroine” (Howard 428). Similarly, we see a transformed Othello at the end of the play – “a stereotypically jealous, irrational and murderous Moor” who “strikes his wife in public, orders the murder of Cassio, strangles Desdemona in her bed and kills himself, an act of which within a Christian framework is taboo, a mark of despair rather than trust in God’s providential care” (428). He is but a shadow of what he was in the first act - a confident and poised General who comments confidently to a crowd of armed men: “Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust’em” (*Oth.* I.ii.59). To some extent, all tragic heroes disintegrate before the moment of death allows for a partial requital of earlier greatness.

Othello’s disintegration seems to be a consequence of his being a barbarian, a barely civilized Moor, whose savage and destructive instincts are let loose by Iago’s clever manipulations. He identifies with the Venetian state as the seat of justice and fort of civilization while locating criminality with “others” or “outsiders” like the Turk and the Moor. At the moment of his death he says:

.... In Aleppo once,

Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk

Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,

I took him by th' throat the circumcised dog

And smote him - thus. (V.ii.36-5)

Thus, Othello is both the defender of the state of Venice and also the “turbaned Turk” and “circumcised dog” who must be killed.

Jean E Howard concludes her feminist reading of Othello claiming:

For contemporary feminists it has become important to understand how the ‘fair’ Desdemona is constructed in relation to the ‘black’ Othello and how the gender and racial ideologies of the play intersect to destroy both the Moorish general and his Venetian wife. The unjust suffering of Desdemona, the wife falsely accused of the linked crimes of bad housewifery and sexual promiscuity, reveals how easily an early modern woman could lose the title ‘good wife’ and be vilified as a whore. Equally horrific is that in *Othello* the wronged wife’s persistence in virtue requires both her increasing passivity and ultimately her death, and this martyrdom coincides with the play’s escalating emphasis on Othello’s barbarity. To the extent that Othello enables the fantasy of victimised white womanhood imperilled by black masculinity, it circulates stereotypes still being combated today. (429)

No one knows with certainty how *Othello* was perceived in Shakespeare's own time. However, it is true that after the Restoration it was one of the most frequently revived of Shakespeare's plays. But the emphasis was on its domesticity. The question of Othello's colour was not very important. The basic structure of melodrama is meticulously observed in the play – "Justice is vindicated; Othello's heroic stature restored by means of a heroic suicide; the villain taken to the rack, Desdemona, exonerated of any wrongdoing"(Marowitz, Roar 49). But this sort of domesticated drama especially after the developments of twentieth-century drama is less interesting than if *Othello* were to be viewed as a political drama or a play about colour.

As Shakespeare's outsiders, both Shylock and Othello are set against the same city – Venice. The former provides monetary services to the city and fortifies its economy; the latter, a hired mercenary and successful warrior, provides military services and fortifies the city's walls. As long as they serve their purpose, "they are tolerated and grudgingly accepted" (56). The bias against Shylock is openly referred to both by Gratiano and Antonio. But Othello is respected and his 'outsiderness' never becomes an issue but for the fact that Brabantio is furious at having lost a daughter and Iago is generally throwing insults against black-skinned men. But it is significant that it always has been an issue in Othello's mind. Hence Iago finds it easy to kindle the fires which finally consumes the General. However, "Emilia is an even subtler study in latent racist feeling than Brabantio. Up to the point of the murder she never

alludes to Othello's race"(Berry320). But she explodes with suppressed racial hatred when Othello confronts her with the murder:

OTHELLO. She's like a liar gone to burning hell:

Twas I that killed her.

EMILIA. O, the more angel she,

And you the blacker devil!(*Oth.* V.ii.129-31)

Her revulsion against Othello is shockingly apparent in her use of the word "blacker". Nevertheless, Othello sees himself as an intruder when he acquires Desdemona. He is aware that he has entered a world where no Moor has ever before achieved such eminence. Some part of him is willing to believe that Cassio or anybody else of Desdemona's race "could blithely cuckold him because, endemically, they belong to the charmed society in which he is only a hired mercenary (58), Marowitz strongly feels that Iago's work is done for him by

Othello's deep-rooted suspicion that a white woman will never remain faithful to an outsider. His desire to strangle her is part-and-parcel of his perceived inability to possess her, because in the dark and rumbling boiler-room of his soul he does'nt believe he ever truly can possess her, the hint that someone else has comes springingly to the fore. (58)

After Desdemona's murder and the discovery of Iago's treachery, Othello goes back to his deep rooted fears: "I am black and have not those soft

parts of conversation that chamberers have”. (*Oth.III.iii.265-7*) Also when he is forced to defend himself before the high officials of Venice, he says:

Rude am I in my speech
 And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace,
 For since these arms of mine had seven years pith
 Till now nine moons wasted, they have used
 Their dearest action in the tented field;
 And little of this great world can I speak
 More than pertains to feats of broils and battle;
 And therefore little shall I grace my cause
 In speaking for myself. (*I.iii.81-9*)

Othello, here, admits to being “ a man that doesn’t speak the same language as those in his immediate social milieu”(Marowitz, Roar59). In his professions of love for Desdemona which he expresses in Act II Scene I, he reminds one of “the effusive exhibitions of love and endearment often found between eloping married couples” (59). “O my soul’s joy” he exclaims, If after every tempest come such calms/May the winds blow till they have wakened Death”(182-4). And then;”If it were now to die/’twere now to be most happy; for I fear/ My soul hath her content so absolute/ That not another comfort like to this Succeeds in unknown fate”(187-91) And later “Sweet powers!/ I cannot

speak enough of this content; It stops me here; (touching his heart) it is too much of joy(193-5).

The seeds of racism are apparently present in the play but Marowitz goes beyond the sexual image in *An Othello* “to present a critique of dominant, capitalist, white culture in the contemporary world” (Scott 112). His version of Shakespeare’s play is based on the writings of black activists, Malcolm X in particular. It is from Malcolm X that he learns “the difference between the house Negro and the field Negro on the American plantations” (112). The passage from Malcolm X explains further the House Negro and the Field Negro.

Back in slavery days there was what they called the House Negro and the Field Negro. The House Negroes lived in the house with master... They loved their master more than the master loved himself... On that same plantation there was the Field Negro- those were the masses. The Negro in the field caught hell. He ate left overs... The field Negro was beaten from morning to night[...]He hated his master. (qtd.in Marowitz, Being 170)

The common people are the Field Negroes. It has always been the strategy of the white man to raise someone from among the House Negroes and use him to control the masses - to keep them passive, peaceful and non-violent. And he becomes their spokesman – a Negro leader. The so-called black revolution was, therefore, not just a black rising against the white but of the

House Negroes being convinced by the Field Negroes of their need to be freed from subjugation and to understand the nature of the discontent brewing in the fields” (Scot 112).

An Othello was written at a time when black freedom movements were common in the United States of America and the United Kingdom and there were rapid changes in Southern Africa. Zimbabwe had won the right to affirm its identity and the racial ferment was beginning to brew within South Africa.

Shakespeare’s distinct narrative dichotomy is made complex by Marowitz depicting his Iago as a black man. The difference between Iago and Othello is suggestive of the difference between the Field Negro and the House Negro. Iago is highly envious of Othello and therefore has his own opinions about Othello’s courting of Desdemona and the stories of his adventures.

All that shit about ‘hair-breath ‘scapes’ and ‘Anthropophagi’ and even how they chained your back ass and how you was hip enough to leave all those cotton-pickin’ coons behind you cause you knew where all that gravy lay, and it weren’t in the cotton fields or the hold of slave ships..... No, you bet your sweet little ass, it weren’t. It was in Mr. Charlie’s army, ey black-boy? With all that lick’n polish, and two pairs of suits, and plenty of fried chicken and chitlin’s once a week. And brown-nosin’it up the ranks and steppin’ on your kinky-haired brethren to do it. (*An Oth.* 265)

But both Iago and Othello are victims of white supremacy. Othello is made use of as the white man's instrument of self-preservation - defending the Venetians against the Turks. But the moment the danger is overcome and the Turks are defeated he is summoned by the duke who states to Cassio, "We don't want a bloody coon General trottin' around these islands with a white pussy in tow, and subvertin' the authority of our rule" (*An Oth.*286).

The black-white contrast is well integrated into the play and becomes a symbol of illusion and disillusionment. Edward Berry claims that "the fact of Othello's alienation is the play's most striking visual effect. One can imagine something of the original impact upon Shakespeare's audience"(318). Marowitz's play begins with black hands appearing from the darkness to embrace the breasts of the white woman. But the white woman is also an emblem of Othello's vulnerability. According to Michael Scott, Desdemona is responsible for his downfall both sexually and racially. The whole tragedy is centred round "a large strawberry spotted handkerchief that floats down from above" (113). Being a white woman, she too has her own whims about sex. In one scene she even turns to the audience and asks how many of them have not wished to do as she has done:

Wouldn't you have, if you'd had the chance? If his arms had lifted you, like a baby into a waiting cradle, and his mouth had eaten away the hunger of a thousand parched summers; days filled with dry flirtations and rough-and-loveless goodnight-kisses. Wouldn't you have? If one night, the dream had sprinted

out from under your sheets and stood rock-solid by the foot of the bed saying: Let's! And the hell with everything else! Wouldn't you have?

Wouldn't you? (*An Oth.*292)

Iago makes a snide remark on overhearing this: "O ain't we the noblest little ole savages you ever clapped your eyes on? I do declare, we are" (292-3).

Othello is out to destroy himself so Iago as the Field Negro has very little to contribute to his destruction. He even asks:

Who me? A double dealin'son-of-a-bitch? Shit, man, that's the kettle callin' the pot black.... Why don't he have a heart-to-heart with his li'l white pussy. Put it to her. 'You been messin' round with one of my horny little roosters?... But do he say that? No man, he ready to chop her into little pieces without so much as a howd'ye-do, Oooh-oo, he achin' to whip her ass so bad, It think I just wantin' my time plantin' little black seeds. (288)

Marowitz draws in the audience in a consideration of the issues. Scott wonders whether the black/white sexual relationship is 'based on ignorance, fear, submission and domination. He presumes that each of us in the audience, being involved in these issues, is subverting them in our subconscious. Brabantio, for instance, asks the audience how many would want their daughter to marry a black man. Marowitz resorts to various techniques to drive home his

point. For example, he makes the audience realise that they are only watching a play. To quote Scott:

The boundaries of the drama are deliberately confused in a metadramatic exercise... The actor of Othello becomes distracted only half concentrating on his role-play. The actress playing Desdemona becomes scared. It is the actor of Othello who kills her. In this way Marowitz prevents the audience relaxing into an enjoyment of a clear cut narrative line. Rather their sensibilities are deliberately disordered in the chaotic movement in and out of character. The duke and Lodovico cut Othello's throat. Iago takes the body away and Desdemona rises from her bed. Her murder was another Othello fantasy. Whitey has succeeded yet again (115).

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 cunnin', 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. Whitey Shakespeare embraced then what was a small perplexity (in them good old days); that Jewwhitey Marowitz responds to the assault of the present with this play. As a result we can get the beauty of it hot, precise like stilettos, as coercive as a heavy storm (257).