

4 ICLICE 2016-24 Sandip Mondal

Race, Ideology and Theatre: A Classroom Reading of *Othello*

Sandip Mondal
University of Kalyani
Kalyani, India

ABSTRACT

As a state-sponsored artist Shakespeare's position was critical and ambivalent in the ideology of the white masculine self. Written much after Titus and Andronicus, which conforming to the convention of the Elizabethan stage presented the Moor, Aaron as a villain, Othello represents the black Moor in equivocal terms. A reading of Othello in the classroom corroborates this ambivalent authoriality, since a play, meant primarily for the performance on stage, is reborn with the active participation of the students and teacher. The symbiotic relationship amongst the audience, actors and the ideology of theatre is recreated in terms of the interaction between the teacher and students present in the classroom. Such a recreation of the theatrical space, through the 'reading' of Othello inside the classroom might pose challenge to the dominant critical reception of the text. The body of students present in the classroom, in keeping with the theatrical space recreated within it, might also recreate the moment when for the white Elizabethan audience Othello is relegated to a criminal for 'stealing' and subsequently murdering a girl of their community vis-à-vis race. This argument becomes even more tenable once we take into consideration the soliloquies of Iago. His communication with the audience through soliloquies is a strategy to assure them about the punishment of Othello for his act of transgression. Thus this would attempt to show how the 'meaning' of a play is derived from the teaching-learning process within the classroom.

Keyword: Theatre audience

Introduction

The amount of liberty that a teacher of literary studies takes has prevented the text from being anchored to one particular author, ideology and context. This process of liberation of a literary text is amenable to the larger discussions of structuralist and poststructuralist assumptions pitted against earlier notions liberal humanism. The emerging schools of literary theories negate the liberal humanist idea that a text is created solely by its author. The structuralist proposition of author being created by the schemes of language rather than the text/language being created by the author finds critical expressions in Roland Barthes' 1968 essay "The Death of the Author"

Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted. Which is why, it is derisory to condemn the new writing in the name of humanism hypocritically turned champion of the reader's rights. Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader;

for it, the writer is the only person in literature. We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of good society in favour of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers, or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author. (148)

The reading of a text therefore has never been for a reader an experience set in isolation. However much one tries the process of reading automatically entails his or her understanding of society, culture and ideology. The text thus becomes inextricably linked to the reader's position in a specific culture and ideology.

Classroom, apart from being space for students' desks, a teacher's table and a blackboard, apart from being just a unit of an academic institution is also an interesting site for critical debates, contestations and resistance where every text is reborn. The rebirth of a text inside the classroom is made possible since it is being read, analysed and interpreted in a time different from a time when the text was written. What comes into play more importantly is the journey of the text from its 'originary' moment to the point of time when the text is being read.

A taxonomic analysis is essential at this point which would unfurl the ways in which teaching of a playtext is different from other categories of texts belonging to different genres and subgenres. When a poem is taught in the classroom the teacher primarily assumes the role of an interpreter hardly emulating the role of the author. The teaching process of a novel slightly moves away from this technique. The teacher might analyse the context and different characters but never assumes the role of the author or of the characters portrayed in the novel. He mostly remains an interpreter.

The teaching of a play is far more complex. Unlike the text of a poem or a novel the text of a play is not written for the purpose of reading in isolation, as an individual experience. As opposed to the schemes of other genres the 'meaning' of a play is not derived merely from the written/verbal images. The 'meaning' of a play is embedded in the performance of the text on stage. However the performance is not just restricted to the functions taking place on stage i.e. the action and the dialogues of the characters, props on the stage and other possible theatrical schemes all of which largely denote the idea of production. But meaning of a text, particularly of a play can wholly be conceived once the journey from production to reception is complete. The communication between the audience and the performers on stage and also other theatrical schemes makes this journey complete; the reception of the performance by the audience creates new meaning of the play. The teaching of a play in the classroom thus emulates a performance on stage where the teacher plays the role of something more than an interpreter. He becomes a persona where all characters are roled into one.

As a state-sponsored artist Shakespeare's position was critical and ambivalent in the ideology of the white masculine self. Written much after *Titus and Andronicus*, which conforming to the convention of the Elizabethan stage presented the Moor, Aaron as a villain, *Othello* represents the black Moor in equivocal terms. A reading of *Othello* in the classroom corroborates this ambivalent authoriality, since a play, meant primarily for the performance on stage, is reborn with the active participation of the students and teacher. The symbiotic relationship amongst the audience, actors and the ideology of theatre is recreated in terms of the interaction between the teacher and students present in the classroom. Such a recreation of the theatrical space, through the 'reading' of *Othello* inside the classroom might pose challenge to the dominant critical reception of the text. The body of students present in the classroom, in keeping with the theatrical space recreated within it, might also recreate the moment when for the white Elizabethan audience Othello is relegated to a criminal for

'stealing' and subsequently murdering a girl of their community vis-à-vis race. This argument becomes even more tenable once we take into consideration the soliloquies of Iago. His communication with the audience through soliloquies is a strategy to assure them about the punishment of Othello for his act of transgression.

Shakespeare's attitude towards the racial 'other' finds the most critical expression in *Othello*. Marking a deliberate departure from the Elizabethan stage in terms of the representation of the racial 'other', Shakespeare's *Othello* critically deploys the theme of race and gender. With the apparent traversing of the stereotypical representation of Moors as villains, Shakespeare also comes back to the tropes of the conventions of the Elizabethan theatre by representing Othello as both naïve and cruel. Shakespeare's use of certain schemes to construct the notion of the 'other', which corresponds to the larger Renaissance world, involves emulation/representation of the exotic land through the stories of Othello, the ways Othello presents the handkerchief, Othello's own skin colour and his relation to the state ideology.

The journey of Shakespeare's *Othello* from production to reception from the domain of the performers on stage to the open arena of the audience, once again recreated in the classroom through the symbiotic relation between the teacher and the students thus creates a new meaning. The presumption that the teacher along with elaborating on the critical tradition of *Othello* would read from the text for textual analysis might lead to a different kind of reception of the text altogether. The reading out of the text, particularly of the soliloquies creates a theatrical ambience in the classroom which in turn relates to the communication between the performers and the audience of the Elizabethan England.

Despite the contact between different sorts of 'others' and the English Elizabethan World the common audience of theatre often place outside the Renaissance project of enlightenment was not very comfortable with the idea of a black 'other' living the ways of their culture. The visit of the Moorish ambassador Abd el-Quahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed Anoun to the court of queen Elizabeth in 1600 could not ease the situation. When Shakespeare chooses a black man as the hero of his play he is playing out with all the conventional and critical imaginings about the notions of the black man available in Elizabethan context.

The beginning of the play presents two distinctly discordant propositions about the acceptability of Othello. While for the state reason the Duke, representing public sphere, endorses Othello definitely as a soldier and as bridegroom in their society Brabantio, Desdemona's father, representing private sphere considers the marriage between Desdemona and Othello detrimental to the purity and perhaps superiority of the white, Christian races. It is however presumable that the audience in this crucial juncture of the narrative would side with Brabantio rather than accepting the Duke's endorsement of Othello for encroaching the domain of the 'white, masculine self'. The students emulating the position of the Christian, white Elizabethan audience, are therefore appalled by the idea of marital consummation between Othello and Desdemona. The fear miscegenation is so deep rooted the European colonial imagination. So what captivates the audience here is not the resolution of initial turmoil in the court of the Duke, nor the representation of the exotic lands and narratives. The audience is primarily overwhelmed by this fear of miscegenation, the mixing of two culturally dichotomous elements – the black and the white, the Christian and the non-Christian which might lead to the birth of an inferior race not potent enough to expand the project of colonialism.

The convention of soliloquies in the canon of Shakespeare vis-à-vis the Elizabethan stage has been a very effective theatrical tool. Through soliloquies the characters speak their minds and most importantly the characters directly communicate with the audience. The

soliloquies articulated by the teacher in the classroom thus further helps building a theatrical space that refers back to the ideology and the context when the play was written chiefly for performance.

The soliloquies of Iago in *Othello* thus problematise the reception of the text at large. Apparently presented as a villain, a Machiavellian, the character of Iago is rather complex. The reading the printed text, as a book would confirm the notion that Iago is the villain of the play, but when performed among the white Elizabethan audience would perhaps lead to an altogether different ‘meaning’. Once he has stated the diabolical schemes he appears alone before the audience with his soliloquies in order to assure them that the penalty will be unleashed on both Desdemona and Othello for the act of transgression.

Such proposition finds expression in Act 2 Scene 3:

Iago And what's he then that says I play the villain,
 When this advice is free I give, and honest,
 Probal to thinking, and indeed the course
 To win the Moor again? For 'tis most easy
 Th'inclining Desdemona to subdue
 In any honest suit.....
 How am I then a villain

With the apparent travesty of the conventional notions of a villain, Shakespeare's representation of Iago is intricate and ambivalent. He is constantly playing out with ideas of villain available in contemporary Elizabethan theatre. The above soliloquy, replete with unmistakable sense of irony functions at multifarious levels in terms of the reception of the diegetic ingredients of the play. Shakespeare's deployment of comedic tropes in the beginning of the play further complicates the reception of the play. *Othello* begins where the comedies usually end – the romantic marriage of lovers sanctioned by the state if not by familial authority. But such union of lovers instead of generating happiness among the audience creates a sense of anxiety and fear – fear of miscegenation, anxiety that their daughters might also be ‘stolen’ similarly by other moors. It is at this crucial moment that the ‘villainy’ of Iago generates a sense of assurance for the white, Christian Elizabethan audience. Along with subverting the notions of villain Shakespeare presents a hero in *Othello* who is naïve, gullible and more importantly cruel. Shakespeare's construction of Othello, in keeping with such images, corresponds to the larger European colonial epistemology. Ania Loomba elaborates on this aspect in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*:

Thus laziness, aggression, violence, greed, sexual promiscuity, bestiality, primitivism, innocence and irrationality are attributed (often contradictorily and inconsistently) by the English, French, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese colonists to Turks, African, Native Americans, Jews, Indians, the Irish and others. (93)

Shakespeare's subscription to such negative images of the ‘other’ in creating the image Othello finds heightened expression in Act 5 Scene 2 when Othello murders Desdemona for the false story of jealousy concocted by Iago, for ‘the trifle light as air’ anchored on the false image of the handkerchief.

The scene begins with the following lines spoken by Othello:

“It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul:/Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars.
 It is the cause. I'll not shed her blood,/ Nor scar the white skin of hers than snow
 And smooth as monumental alabaster – ”

The poetic effusions articulated by Othello might be appreciated by a reader of a printed edition living far away from the ideology and context when the play was originally written and subsequently performed. But for the white Christian audience Othello becomes an abomination for his cruelty with which is now bent on murdering a white girl, Desdemona. So, in terms of the reception by the contemporary audience Othello differs from other heroes of Shakespeare. The spectacle of a white girl being murdered by a black Moor on stage, despite her desperate appeal “Kill me tomorrow; let me live tonight!” is perhaps designed to evoke rage and anger among the audience against Othello who from valiant soldier and a courteous lover is reduced to a villain, a murderer driven by the elements of naivety, jealousy and cruelty. Such reduction, definitely a new ‘meaning’ of the play is inferred from a classroom reading which at the same time explains Shakespeare’s critical and ambivalent position in contemporary ideology, culture and theatre.

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. “The Death of the Author.” *Image-Music-Text*. 142-48.
---. *Image-Music-Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. Great Britain: Fontana, 1977. Print.
- Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Proudfoot, Richard, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan, eds. *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*. London: A&C Black Publishers Ltd, 2007. Print.