

“To Love the Moor”: Postcolonial Artists Write Back to Shakespeare’s Othello

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Abstract

In this essay, I consider the issue of ‘writing back’ through the case study of how William Shakespeare’s tragedy *Othello* has been adapted and challenged by global writers. I begin by exploring Salih’s parody and inversion of Othello in *Season of Migration to the North*, through which he not only exposes Mustafa’s colonized anger towards his white lovers, but also calls into question Shakespeare’s depiction of the ‘noble Moor’ (III. iv: 26). In doing so, he is participating in what literary critics term intertextuality; in other words, he creates a web of references to other texts. Later postcolonial writers have fashioned full adaptations of *Othello* or ‘written back’ to the play. I scrutinize Toni Morrison’s 2012 play *Desdemona*, which is accompanied by music from the Malian singer Rokia Traoré. Morrison brings *Desdemona* centre stage and suggests that her individual beauty and purity were partly facilitated by an almost-silenced figure in the play, her attentive African maid, Barbary/Sa’ran. For the essay’s second half, I examine a group of Indian artists writing back to *Othello*. Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Omkara* (2006) is the second film in a twenty-first-century Bollywood trilogy of Shakespearean adaptations. In *Omkara*, issues of caste and biracial identity in colour-conscious India replace Shakespeare’s interest in the people then known as blackamoors. Finally, I engage with comic novelist Upamanyu Chatterjee’s short story ‘Othello Sucks’, in which his characters are critical of Shakespeare. Their irreverence towards the play in the context of New India is entertaining and instructive.

Keywords: writing back, postcolonial, William Shakespeare, Othello