

Unit: 24: Cross-cultural and Transcultural Shakespeare

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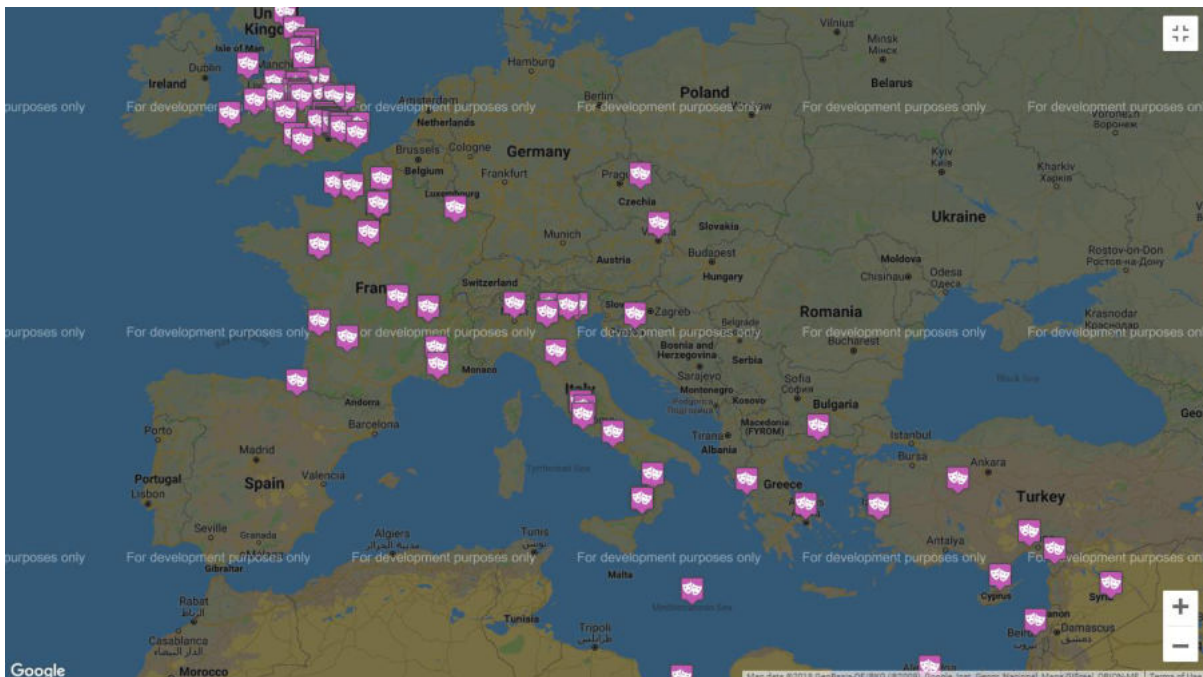
Theatre reflects the changes in society and the increasing presence of cross-cultural Shakespeare in print and performances testify to the changes in our understanding of the cultures across the world. Shakespeare was largely monocultural when he lived and imperial England exported him more as a monocultural product to the world outside. However, the Shakespeare we come across in the cultures of the world today is more transcultural as he is increasingly accepted the world over as a cross-cultural phenomenon and he even returns to England as one. This movement from monocultural to transcultural Shakespeare through cross-cultural and multicultural route has been the story of many actors, directors and theatres of different cultures and is neutral about cultural interpretation as in Tim Supple's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which used multinational cast and multiple languages and multiple theatres.

In this unit, we will be looking at Monocultural, Cross-cultural, Transcultural, Intercultural and Multicultural Shakespeare.

Monocultural Shakespeare

Shakespeare wrote his works and produced his plays for an English-speaking, patriarchal, Christian white audience. His actors, materials, resources and patrons were also the same. Although his London also had people of different languages, regions, religions and colour, the dominant ideology controlled the society in general. The British Empire was an extension of this London. The same group continued to wield power in imperial England although it was a minority within the British Empire.

Locations of Shakespeare's Scenes



Source: <https://www.nosweatshakespeare.com/shakespeares-plays/shakespeares-play-locations>

Shakespeare's locations are set all across Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. His major locations are Alexandria (*Ant.*), Damascus (*Per.*), Syria (*Ant.*), Antioch (*Per.*), Tarsus (*Per.*), Cyprus (*Oth.*), Troy (*Tro.*), Ephesus (*Per.*), Pentapolis in Libya (*Per.*), unnamed Mediterranean island (*Tmp.*), Athens (*Tim*), Actium (*Ant.*), Philippi (*JC*) which were away from the European mainland. These were spread across from Sicily (*WT*) and Belmont (*MV*) in Italy to Inverness (*Mac.*) in Scotland; and Navarre (*LLL*) in Spain to Bohemia (*WT*) in Czechoslovakia.

Shakespeare did not observe the language and culture of the wide canvas he had used. His limited company of English male actors impersonated all these characters and left the rest to the imagination. His Elizabethan audience did not mind that Cleopatra was an Anglo-Saxon boy in Elizabethan dress – they had a lot to imagine. He also had no colour actors. So, when Othello was first staged at Whitehall Palace on 1 November 1604, the white English actor Richard Burbage used a blackface make-up to play Othello. All his actors were European men, and so were all the other acting companies in England. He used English men and boys to play the role of women and did not challenge the convention. With his Anglo-Saxon male crew, Shakespeare featured some prominent non-European characters like Othello (*Oth.*), Caliban (*Tmp.*), Shylock (*MV*), Aron (*Tit.*), Cleopatra (*Ant.*) and the Indian boy (*MND*). They and his Greek characters dressed only like the English. His audience did not care. Probably because they did not expect realist presentations, or because most of them were unfamiliar about the original appearance of these characters.

Many minorities are also represented in Shakespeare. The racial minorities in Tudor England were significant. Catherine of Aragon who arrived in London in October 1501 arrived with an entourage of Moors, Muslims and Jews. The imposing ambassador of the Moroccan king Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed Anoun to Queen Elizabeth and his 16-member entourage visited London in 1600 and lived there for six months. More than a thousand black domestic servants were attached to households of London and even queen Elizabeth had a black woman servant. The queen banished all blacks from her London twice. Red Indians were brought to London dead and alive. Miscegenation was a concern and it is evident in the terms of the fear about the union between Othello and Desdemona, (*Oth.*), Cleopatra and Antony (*Ant.*), Caliban and Miranda, Claribel and the King of Tunis (*Tmp.*), Aaron and Tamora (*Tit.*), and Lancelot and the Moorish woman (*MND*). Portia's sigh of relief as "the Tawny Moor" of Morocco (*MV* 2.1.sd), fails to choose the right casket is more about his colour: "Let all of his complexion choose me so" (*MV* 2.7).

Shakespeare's perception of the English stage was mostly inherited. James Burbage built England's first theatre, *The Theatre* modelled on the Roman coliseum and Greek amphitheatre. It was later dismantled and transplanted to Southwark across River Thames to build the *Globe*. It also followed the inherited tradition handed down to the English from the Greek by the Romans, and by the English social conventions.

It was the patronage of influential persons that significantly elevated the social status of actors who were regarded "masterless" and "without craft". The London Regulations and the formation of Leicester's Men (1574) paved the way for this and changed the status of travelling actors as "rogues and vagabonds" by the time of Shakespeare. The acting was declared a "trade" (1581), a "profession" (1582), and a "qualitie" (1593). Theatre companies did not want to lose their new-found recognition by experimenting with gender, race and language and confined to playing in certain areas, hours of the day, days of the week, and seasons at designated places to escape local opposition and charges of indecency, immorality, blasphemy and harbinger of diseases. These charges followed them

nevertheless, more with reasons than without. To escape these, actors grouped under the patronage of important figures of the period. The patronage received by Shakespeare's men made them known progressively as Lord Chamberlain's Men (1594-1603), Lord Hunsdon's Men (1596-1597), and the King's Men (1603-1642). These theatres and stage productions were expected to follow the socially accepted dominant monocultural norms.

Cross-cultural Shakespeare

As the resources were limited, the Elizabethan theatre kept a tight-knit group who performed more than one character in a play and did other duties behind the curtain. They were all Anglo-Saxon men who responded to the demands of the stage. It hardly looked beyond Englishmen to act like women, racial others and cultural others. These men memorized lines of the plays they performed and collaborated. Henslowe's *Diary* lists the Admiral's Men playing about 150 performances of 30 different plays in August 1595 - February 1596 season and Edward Alleyn acting as the lead character in 70 different plays in the three seasons in between 1595 and 1597. Lord Chamberlain's Men, also demanded the same from its actors. These actors who were monocultural in gender, race, religion, language, food and region acted before an audience that believed in the same ideologies. However, Shakespeare changed over time as he went out of England.

Performances by the Elizabethan actors across Europe when the London theatres were closed down were the early cross-cultural forays of Shakespeare. His early translations might also have been the result of these European visits if not by the Europeans who visited theatres in London. In Germany, *Wanderbühnen* ('travelling companies') which toured northern Europe is speculated to have staged curtailed versions of Shakespeare in translation. Two such German plays, one "about the Jew" and another titled *Der best rate Brudermord* (*Brother-murder Punished*) is speculated to be versions of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Hamlet*. Neuss in Poland has a replica of the Globe Theatre which they claim is a memorial to the Shakespeare plays performed there.

Shakespeare productions in other cultural spaces started in North America in the seventeenth, in Asia in the eighteenth, in Australia and New Zealand in the nineteenth, and in Africa in the twentieth centuries. Colonial India, like other colonies, invited English acting Companies to stage Shakespeare. These companies brought Shakespeare to India around the 1770s and for the expatriate British community in India, which also invited rich Indians. It was these monocultural performances between the 1780s and 1850s that created Shakespeare as a British phenomenon.

Calcutta Theatre performed *Othello* (1780), *Hamlet* (1784), *Romeo and Juliet* (1784), *Richard III* (1788), *Henry IV Part 1* (1788), *Henry IV Part 2* (1788) and records show that Shakespeare was performed elsewhere also: *The Merchant of Venice* (1788, Bristow Theatre), and David Garrick's adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* as *Catherine and Petruchio* (1797, Wheeler Place Theatre) in Calcutta itself. All these monocultural expressions of the British became materials for the cross-cultural forays of Shakespeare.

Gradually, Indians started acting in Shakespeare plays and eventually indigenized Shakespeare over a long period by incorporating elements of local theatres and conventions, and he graduated from English to local languages and from monocultural theatre to cross-cultural theatres. Bengal, the first capital of the British Empire in India took Shakespeare performance and his translations seriously. Bengalis turned to Bengali stage versions of Shakespeare by 1870s at least and many Bengali luminaries acted in Shakespeare roles:

the list of luminaries who acted Shakespearean roles in English reads like a veritable who's who: like Henry Derozio, Kashirasad Ghosh, Krishnamohan Bannerjee, Ramtanu Lahiri, Michael Madhusoodan Dutt, Rajendralala Mitra, Keshub Chander Sen, Rajendra Prasad, Sisir Kumar Bhaduri, Sunit Kumar Chatterjee, just to name a few. (Lal 7-8)

In the process, even as authentic Shakespeare continued even in translation, Shakespeare became popular in indigenised formats. An interesting case in cross-cultural Shakespeare in India is the failure of Girish Chandra Ghosh's authentic and faithful "Scots-Style" *Macbeth* (1893) and the phenomenal success of Amarendra Dutta's Indigenised *Hamlet* as *Hariraj* (1897). Ghosh's spectacularly expensive production flopped miserably while Dutta's Shakespeare adaptation became a great success. While Ghosh gave up theatre, Datta went on adapting *Macbeth* (1899), *Comedy of Errors* as *Konta Ke* (1905), and *The Merchant of Venice* as *Saudagar* (1915). Datta's heroine Tarasundari became famous for her Ophelia (Ham.), Jahananra (MND), Cleopatra (*Ant.*), Portia (MV), and Desdemona (*Oth.*) roles.

India which gravitated away from English Shakespeare towards regional language Shakespeares during the pre-Independence period witnessed many English productions of Shakespeare staged by international troupes during the post-Independence. Oxford Playhouse (1960), the Bristol Old Vic (1963), RSC (1976, 77), Leicester Haymarket (1989), and directors like Norman Marshall (1950), John Barton and Terry Hands (1976), John Dexter (1989) and Michael Bogdanov (1991) had directed Shakespeare in India.

Directors like Fritz Bennewitz and Tim Supple have also tried to experiment with Indians in producing Shakespeare, although in different ways. Supple's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* used actors from different countries, languages and skills and by using his faithful translations in six different languages. Fusing traditional and modern, he rendered Shakespeare using acrobatic fairies to perform aerial stunts on the scaffolding and lengths of fabric hung from the ceiling, even as he allowed artists from different theatre backgrounds to freely express their traditional theatrical expressions.

Transcultural Shakespeare

Shakespeare was brought to the other side through transcultural Shakespeare. India's struggle for Independence put a break not only on the successful journey of the English language Shakespeare of Gregory Kendal's Anglo-Indian troupe Shakespeareana, but also on the regional language productions of Shakespeare. Shakespeareana was an extension of a travelling acting companies which entertained the Allied forces during World War II. As an independent company, it focussed on India's elite schools and toured Indian subcontinent from June 1953 to December 1956. After the initial success, its fortunes dwindled and it came to an end in the 1960s.

The plight of Shakespeareana is reflected in the Hindi movie *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965), featuring the Bollywood actor Sashi Kapoor, a member in the troupe. Another talented Indian actor who joined it was Utpal Dutt and Sashi Kapoor joined Shakespeareana and became great actors on their own. Utpal Dutt who acted as Richard III, Othello, Bottom, Mercutio, Brutus, and later Shylock, Macbeth and Julius Caesar—established his theatre called the Little Theatre, and later localised Shakespeare through *Jatra* theatre across Bengal.

The first translations of Shakespeare into Indian languages were straight academic exercises and faithful translations. Among the Indian languages, he was first translated into Bengali by Claude Monkton, an Englishman who studied Indian languages at Fort William. Records show that he translated *The Tempest* in 1809. The other reported and lost translations include Gurudas Hajra's *Romeo*

evam Juliteera (1848), and Jogendrachandra Gupta's translation of *Hamlet* as *Kirtibilas* (1852). Harachandra Ghosh's translation *The Merchant of Venice* as *Bhanumotir Chittobilas* (1853) which survives is regarded as the earliest Indian translation of Shakespeare. It is not a faithful translation but a transcultural one which localises Shakespeare.

Shakespeare was promoted in the colonial spaces through societies like Shakespeare Society (est.1901) and Dawn Society (est.1902) etc.; and theatres like Playhouse (1753-56), Calcutta Theatre (1774-1808), Bristow Theatre (1789-90), Wheeler Place (1797), Town Hall (1814), Hindu Theatre (1831), Chowringhee (1813-39), Sans Souci (1839-49), Oriental Theatre (1853), Jorashanko Theatre (1854), the Royal Theatre (1872), Bengal Theatre (1873), Star (1883), Minerva (1893), National (1872-74), the Great National (1874), and University Institute Hall (1891) in Calcutta itself before the twentieth century itself. Similar attempts were made elsewhere in India also and some of these theatres specifically catered to Indian performances.

Besides Bengali and Parsi theatres, troupes performing Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, Tamil and Sanskrit also adapted Shakespeare across India. Later, Indian theatre directors like Ebrahim Alkazi, BV Karanth, Habib Tanvir, Atul Kumar, Rajat Kapoor and others have directed well-known Shakespeare stage adaptations and have culturally transplanted him, maintaining the diversity of Indian culture.

Intercultural Shakespeare

Shakespeare's texts become transcultural through inter-textuality, interlingual presentations, inter-racial cast, inter-cultural theatre etc. These fuse the disjointed elements. Shakespeare's intertextuality can be seen from his use of texts from other cultures and his interculturality can be seen from other cultures' use of Shakespeare's works. Shakespeare has used both European and non-European sources directly and indirectly. *Panchatantra*, *Arabian Nights*, *Thousand and One Nights* etc. were available to him in translation through *Decameron*, *Menaechmi*, and *Holinshed's Chronicles* etc. Traces of unrecorded Asian and African folktales, legends, and eulogies are found in Shakespeare and these might have come to him through sailors and travellers to and from foreign lands. Studies trying to identify and analyse his intertextual traces can explain the route and nature of these encounters can throw light into intercultural Shakespeare.

Shakespeare has used different languages including gibberish (AWW 4.1) in his plays. In *Henry V* he uses French in an entire scene (3.4), and partially in another (5.2). He is found in many interlingual performances across the world. Hinglish performances and performance by Indian movie actors like Saeed Jaffrey, Nasiruddin Shah, Shashi Kapoor, Utpal Dutt were featured in significant intercultural Shakespeare productions. The progress of Indian movie adaptations of Shakespeare also shows intercultural Shakespeare. Of the 205 movie adaptations reported in Indian languages, various studies are Silent films (9), Hindi/ Urdu (94), Tamil (26), Telegu (18), Kannada (16), English and English-mixed (12), Bengali (11), Malayalam (8), Marathi (5), Assamese (2), Punjabi (2), Mizo (1) and Tulu (1).

The early Indian intercultural Shakespeare starts on 17 August 1848 with the Indian Baishnab Charan Adhya playing Othello opposite to Mrs Anderson's Desdemona at Sans Souci Theatre in Calcutta. This bold intercultural production received negative comments from the English press. However, this performance encouraged many Indians to stage Shakespeare in public. It was the first time that an Indian appeared in a prominent role on a white stage. A letter to the editor in *The Calcutta Star* announced it as the "debut of a real unpainted nigger Othello which set the whole world of Calcutta agog". A report in the native newspaper *Bengal Hurkara* on 19 August 1848 read: "Othello... was the

great attraction on Thursday Night ... the player however and not the play. Performed by Baboo Bustom Churn Addy ... Shakespeare, exiled from the country he honours so much, seeks asylum in Calcutta boards." But *The Englishman* daily found that "In the delivery, the effects of imperfect pronunciation were but too manifest", and expressed dissatisfaction. The initial performance of the play had to be delayed because of the protest from a group who disliked such interracial performance. These reveal the tension of transporting Shakespeare to a new culture.

With many Indian diaspora actors playing Shakespeare, the line becomes blurred. According to IMBD, the Indo-Canadian actress Nazneen Contractor of Parsi origin who played Marina in *Pericles* the Stratford Festival was the first woman of Indian descent to play a lead role in a Shakespearean play on the main stage of the Stratford Festival. Later she also played at the festival as Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The Shakespeare adaptations made in English and English-mixed Indian languages constitute another genre. These are produced for an international market and the educated local market as well as the Indian diaspora market. Some such examples are: *Mississippi Masala* in English from *Romeo and Juliet*, (dir. Mira Nair, 1991); *Indian Dream* from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (dir. Roger Goldby, 2003); *The Last Lear: Aajker Shahjahan* from *King Lear* (dir. Rituparno Ghosh, 2007); *Hamlet: Prince of Denmark* from *Hamlet* (dir. S. Nathan, 2009); *Life Goes On* from *King Lear* (dir. Sangeeta Datta, 2009); English and Hindi movies such as *Shakespeare Wallah* from *Romeo and Juliet* (dir. James Ivory, 1965); *Monsoon Wedding* from *Romeo and Juliet* (dir. Mira Nair, 2001); *Bollywood Queen* from *Romeo and Juliet*, (dir. Jeremy Wooding, 2002); *Such a Long Journey* from *King Lear* (dir. Sturla Gunnarsson 2002); English, Hindi and Spanish version like *Bollywood/Hollywood* from *Romeo and Juliet*, (dir. Deepa Mehta, 2002); *10ml Love* from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (dir. Sharat Katariya, 2010); and *The Hungry* from *Titus Andronicus*, (dir. Bornila Chatterjee, 2017) are some examples for intercultural productions of Shakespeare.

From *Mississippi Masala* (1991) to *The Hungry* (2017), Shakespeare adaptations in India have come a long way. The former features an interracial romance between African Americans and Indian Americans in the United States, with Denzel Washington, Sarita Choudhury, and Roshan Seth in the lead roles. The latter features Naseeruddin Shah and Tisca Chopra in the lead roles. The same can be said about local adaptations like Vishal Bharadwaj's trilogy *Maqbool* (*Macbeth*, 2003), *Omkaara* (*Othello*, 2006), and *Haider* (*Hamlet*, 2014) which acculturate Shakespeare seamlessly and became a national and international commercial and artistic success.

Stage productions like Rajat Kapoor's unconventional *Hamlet the Clown Prince* in which a group of clowns discuss to enact *Hamlet* and create a new perspective; and *Lear* in which an ageing actor recounts his life to make amends with his daughter; Vikram Kapadia's *A Merchant of Venice* (in English), set within Mumbai stockbrokers' world; Atul Kumar's *Piya Behrupiya*, in which *The Twelfth Night* unfolds as a musical revel. It has an Olivia cooing in semi-classical notes, folksy Viola, and an interjecting actor/writer who plays Sebastian speaking to the audience as Indian stage performances do.

Multicultural Shakespeare

Multicultural Shakespeare studies the productions involving interracial actors. It uses the postcolonial literary strategy of "writing back" Shakespeare's plots, characters and themes by looking at them from the point of view of a local context and by reworking them as transcultural adaptations. These re-dress colonial discourses by using national and local paradigms producing new localised interpretations.

Manga Shakespeare which fuses Manga and Shakespeare, British Black and Asian productions of Shakespeare are examples.

How to present foreign characters in Shakespeare in monocultural societies posed a problem very early on. Till Laurence Olivier reintroduced blackface Othello, Othello had been played in the white world with an olive-skinned Moor. It was a tradition the New York actor Edmund Kean started in 1814 by intentionally lightening the stage makeup to “tawny” from the standard blackface (Marks, 2001, p. 104). He whitened Othello to relate to his racist audience both practically and ideologically and made Othello like whites so that the New Yorkers could identify with him. As societies became more multicultural, not only accepting Othello as black but also allowing black actors to play Shakespeare’s white characters also became normal.

Manga Shakespeare is a transcultural and trans-medium fusion of Shakespeare by simplifying his complex plot into image-based stories. Black and Asian Shakespeare is an assertion of local cultures on to monocultural Shakespeare. These are forced fusions. The multicultural Shakespeare productions involving black and Asian actors have a long history from Ira Aldridge, the American black actor who gate-crashed racist England in 1825 and the black actor and civil rights advocate Paul Robeson who played Othello in London in 1930 opposite Peggy Ashcroft. The latest in the genre are the works of the Hip-hop Shakespeare Company’s Shakespeare productions.

These raise questions about Othello’s race and Shakespeare’s characterization of race. He might have been influenced by how the natives saw the ambassador of the Moroccan king Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed Anoun to Queen Elizabeth. He came to negotiate with England about the possibility of an alliance against Spain and spent six months in England and attended the anniversary of Elizabeth’s coronation in November 1600. Shakespeare might have come across and got influenced by him as he portrayed his “Noble Moor”, Othello. In his oil painting, this imposing figure appears darker than white Europeans, but not black. Shakespeare’s Othello was also made blacker than he was in the backdrop of the later claims of white superiority. Shakespeare also depicts a Prince of Morocco, the ‘tawny [or light-skinned] Moor’, in *The Merchant of Venice*. The prince was apprehensive about Venetian colour prejudice, and requests not to be disliked ‘for [his] complexion’ (2.1). Still, we see Portia expressing relief when he fails the test, saying ‘Let all of his complexion choose me so’ (2.7).

The tradition of white actors staging black Othello by blackening themselves is old as Shakespeare’s days when Richard Burbage played the part. In films also it was white actors like Laurence Olivier who played Othello. However, black actors also have successfully played roles of white characters on the stage and the screen. American-born Ira Aldridge (1807-67), the first black Shakespearean actor to play Othello also went on to stage Macbeth and Richard III in the 1820s. Paul Robeson (1898- 1976) was the first to play Othello in Britain since Aldridge. Earle Hyman and the living actors like Laurence Fishburne, James Earl Jones have also played Othello. Some of them have also played other Shakespeare characters: James Earl Jones also played Oberon and Benedick; Adrian Lester played Henry V and Macbeth; David Oyelowo played as Henry VI in all three parts in RSC production; Condola Rashad staged Juliet in 2013 in a Broadway production featuring an all-white Montague family and an all-black Capulet family; and Noma Dumezweni staged Ursula (Ado), Paulina (WT), and Calphurnia (JC) in RSC productions. The other major black actors who played white characters in Shakespeare include Denzel Washington (*Much Ado About Nothing; Richard III*), and Morgan Freeman (*Taming of the Shrew, Coriolanus*,1979).

An examination of the British productions over the past century shows that although Shakespeare's plays become increasingly multicultural, black and minority actors are still preferred for minor roles and are ignored for major ones. For example, till David Lee-Jones in 2012 played Richard III, the last minority actor to play it was the British actor of Burmese descent, Abraham Sofaer in 1935. Although they had been preferred for silent and exotic roles, colour-blind casting has enabled some black and minority actors to play Shakespeare characters. White actors also play Othello without blackface. In a 2015 RSC production, a black actor has played Iago (not Othello). In a recent production of Verdi's opera *Otello*, the Latvian tenor Aleksandrs Antonenko appeared in the title role without blackface (Lunden, 2015).

In the transcultural port city of London itself, Shakespeare must have heard from travellers to European, African, and Asian countries stories from other cultures. His intertextual multivocality reveals traces of African and Asian literary traditions. These texts and their intertextual relations form more than simple writing back to the empire, as it reveals that it is Shakespeare who adapted and rewrote those and not the other way. In colonial context and asymmetrical power, adaptations by Shakespeare came to get recognised as the original.