CHAPTER III

OTHELLO THERE, OTHHELLO HERE

Suresh Gopi as Kannan Perumalayan in Kaliyattam. This performance won him the National Award for the best actor in 1997.

Lal wearing the spathe-masque of Paniyan
Perumalayan shattering his reflection in water

Perumalayan watching the mirror reflection of himself and Thamara. Manju Warrier as Thamara.
Shakespeare's currency is so unlimited that he has transcended the borders of the genre of drama and entered into the much more colourful and energetic field of movies. Shakespeare is of course not the first literary person to spread his sway in to the film field. Susan Hayward traces the course of literature's entry into film:

Literary adaptation to film is a long established tradition in cinema starting, for example, with early cinema adaptations of the Bible. By the 1970s, adaptations of the established literary canon had become a marketing ploy by which producers and exhibitors could legitimize cinema going as a venue of 'taste' and thus attract the middle classes to their theatres. Literary adaptations gave cinema the respectable cachet of entertainment-as-art. (3)

This chapter proposes to analyze a cross-cultural adaptation of Shakespeare's Othello. The text under scrutiny is the Malayalam film Kaliyattam (1997), an adaptation of Othello as the director Jayaraj himself acknowledges. Having been set in an entirely alien cultural and linguistic environment, the play provides enormous subversive potential for the director. The objective here is to study the extent to which this potential is explored and made use of in the adaptation. This chapter analyses the ideology that governs the production of the film and the meanings that are
transmitted through it. Even as the probe gets triggered off, one feels very strongly that the film is not ideologically innocuous.

Traditionally, cinema is claimed to reflect reality. However, no film can, in fact, be neutral in its perspective. The primary function of cinema as a cultural industry is to reproduce and naturalise dominant ideologies. Jean Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni perceive cinema not as a reflection of reality but as a reproduction of reality. They write:

But the tools and techniques of film-making are a part of 'reality' themselves, and furthermore 'reality' is nothing but an expression of the prevailing ideology. Seen in this light, the classic theory of cinema that the camera is an impartial instrument which grasps, or rather is impregnated by, the world in its 'concrete reality' is an eminently reactionary one. What the camera in fact registers is the vague, unformulated, untheorized, unthought-out world of the dominant ideology. Cinema is one of the languages through which the world communicates itself to itself. They constitute its ideology for they produce the world as it is experienced when filtered through the ideology. (As Althusser defines it, more precisely: Ideologies are perceived-accepted- suffered cultural objects, which work fundamentally on men by a
process they do not understand. What men express in their ideologies is not their true relation to their conditions of existence, but how they react to their conditions of existence which presupposes a real relationship and an imaginary relationship). So when we set out to make a film, from the very first shot, we are encumbered by the necessity of reproducing things not as they really are but as they appear when refracted through the ideology. (46)

In short, most films appear to act as a manifestation of the ideology which produces them.

There are hundreds of film versions of Shakespeare plays and a multitude of books about them. *Shakespeare on Film* (Ed. Robert Shaughnessy), *Shakespearean Film/Shakespearean Directors* (Peter S. Donaldson), *Shakespeare in the Movies* (Douglas Brode), *Shakespeare, Cinema and Society* (John Collick) . . . the list of titles goes on and on. University courses have already included in their syllabus the study of Shakespeare films. When one thinks about Shakespeare and film, the first thing that is to be borne in mind is the difference in the presentation techniques of a drama and a film. One cannot escape probing whether the conventions and practices of the Elizabethan stage have been suitably altered for the medium of film. The Shakespearean film critic Peter S.
Donaldson is well aware of the possibilities of this transformation. He observes:

I regard each film as the site of a cultural, artistic and personal negotiation the contours of which may be mapped by careful analysis of visual figuration and imagery. Because Shakespeare's plays were intended to be performed on the bare platform stage of the English Renaissance theater, each director must invent a visual design to accompany or supplant the play text. And precisely because words and images, plays and films are so different, study of visual style can often reveal the implicit terms on which Shakespeare and contemporary directors meet (xii).

There is a general consensus that the power of a Shakespeare play resides in the language employed. May be because of the restrictive Elizabethan stage conditions, Shakespeare banked more on poetic language than on spectacle and other scenic devices to create the necessary emotional effect. The Elizabethan theatre goers were more audiences than spectators. But the modern spectators accustomed to the computer-generated techniques of cinematography expect something drastically different. The result is that when the text of the play is converted into a screenplay, there will be a tremendous reduction in the
number of spoken words because mainstream cinema depends for its effect largely on visuals rather than dialogue. For Syd Field, an influential teacher of screenwriting skills, "A screen play is a story told in pictures, and there will always be some kind of problem when you tell the story through words, and not pictures" (56). Susan Hayward also subscribes to Syd Field’s opinion when he writes, "Cinematic discourse differs from that of a novel or a play, for it tells the story through image and sound. Discourse also refers to the social process of making sense and reproducing reality, and thereby of fixing meanings" (87).

Syd Field feels that apart from strong and active characters a stylized visual narrative is necessary for the story to move forward. Films depend mostly on non-verbal means of communication. In spite of the difference between Elizabethan dramaturgy and modern cinematography Shakespearean texts have proved to be highly successful in film translations too. Douglas Brode argues that the cinema can match the fluidity of action on the Shakespearean stage better than the modern theatre. Since the Elizabethan stage had no drop curtain, one scene moved on to the next and all scenes formed a continuous sequence, more like the modern cinema than the modern drama. It is because of this sequentiality of scenes in Shakespeare that the film versions of his texts have found a prominent place in the international market unrestricted by considerations
of language and untroubled by the relatively archaic dialogue of the originals. Like the films of other ‘classics’, they confer respectability on their makers and distributors. While working on a Shakespeare film an American actor is reported to have remarked to Russel Jackson that he was very confident that no one would say “Hey, this is boring. Let's blow up a building” (11). Such is the charisma of a film based on a Shakespeare play. The brand name of Shakespeare is a sure guarantee of its success.

The impact of Shakespeare in contemporary film industry has been such that movies based on Shakespeare’s works are regarded as forming a distinct genre. The famous film critic Harry Keyishian draws our attention to the stature and prestige enjoyed by the parallel Shakespeare film industry:

Film historians have tended, naturally enough, to think of movies based on Shakespeare's works as forming a distinct genre. Such films use his words, characters and plots; they are part of the performance history of his plays; their rich language stands apart from standard Hollywood dialogue; and they were, at least back in the days of the studio system, perceived as 'prestige' works, distinct from the standard mass market film product. It has often seemed, in Geoffrey O'
Brien's words, as if ‘there are regular movies, and then there are Shakespeare movies’. (72)

Shakespeare plays translated into films can be viewed as falling into two broad divisions: those which adopt as many features of a given play's structure and language as possible and those radical ones in which the form and methods of the original play are not respected but changed to suit the circumstances of reception. Shakespearean plays have been adapted all over the world. Their translation into film is in fact a fashion across nations and cultures. Even in a third world erstwhile colony like India, Shakespeare has exerted a tremendous impact. This need not be considered just as a colonial legacy. The film adaptations have conferred respectability on their makers and distributors. These international and intercultural productions do not just happen; they are indeed the products of the conscious effort of certain people. This chapter, therefore, has its focus on the analysis of the political ramifications of one such film — the recent Malayalam film *Kaliyattam* directed by Jayaraj. As a backdrop it seems appropriate to make a brief survey of the Indian encounters with the “master creator”.

By about 1775, Shakespeare was imported into India by the colonizers as an entertainment programme for the English residents of Bombay and Calcutta. In 1835 English was declared the language of
administration and government-aided education in all parts of India. In the new curriculum Shakespeare was made the centre. The intention, as Macaulay stated, was to design "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect” (729). However, with the passage of time, Shakespeare began to be appropriated by the Indians. In 1848, Barry Lewis staged Othello at the Sans Souci Theatre in Calcutta. The role of Desdemona was performed by an English woman, Mrs. Anderson, and Othello was cast by an Indian, Baishnav Charan Auddy. The pairing of a white English woman with a dark Indian man was an unprecedented one. It gave rise to a lot of criticism, though it could gain applause from some quarters. By and by the need to translate his plays into regional languages was also strongly felt. Plays like Madhusudan Dutt's Shormishtha (1858) were the result of this attitude. Pioneers of the Parsi theatre like Jehangir Khambatta, Edulji Khori, and C.S. Nazir, were all supporters of the translated versions of Shakespeare.

John Gillies and others give a brief sketch of the change that took place in the Indian attitude towards Shakespeare:

In general, early adaptations not only changed names and places but rearranged plots, rewrote characters and were liberally embellished with Indian songs and dances. Playwrights of the Parsi theatre plundered the canon,
translating, adapting and collating to satisfy commercial theatre's demand for new material. Parsi touring companies then disseminated this Indianized Shakespeare throughout the subcontinent. Nearly half the canon was adapted and performed in the characteristically hybrid and extravagant Parsi style, mostly without acknowledgement or 'anxiety of Influence'. Though entirely driven by commercial interests and in effective collaboration with the colonial order, Parsi theatre was profanely subversive of the elitist English-language Shakespeare prescribed by the colonial regime — one reason, perhaps, for its popularity among ordinary people. (259)

Shakespeare has thus been ingeniously indigenised and daringly traditionalised. He has been widely appropriated into specific native performance genres. Examples are an adaptation of *As You Like It* to the “Yakshagana” genre, a traditional art form of Karnataka (1860), the adaptations of *The Tempest, Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* into Marathi “Sangeet Natak” (1878), an adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a Sanskrit play (1906) and so on. B.V. Karanth's *Barnam Vana* (1979), an adaptation of *Macbeth* into
“Yakshagana”, is another fine example of a conscious attempt at indigenising Shakespeare.

Kerala, also, is not behind the other Indian states in the tour to Shakespeare plays. In 1989 King Lear was produced and performed in Kerala in the form of a hybrid “Kathakali” version. “Kathakali” is the traditional ritual dance-drama of Kerala. The Kathakali Lear opened in a Victorian hall with a proscenium stage, a vestige of the British colonial presence. It was performed in various parts of Asia and Europe. The text was originally adapted by the Australian writer-director David Mc Ruvie, translated into Malayalam by the Malayalam Poet Iyyamkode Sreedharan, and then staged by Mc Ruvie and a French dancer, Annette Leday, in collaboration with a group of established Kathakali actors. Sadanam Balakrishnan’s Kathakali Othello (1996) and Sadanam Harikumar's Charudatham (2001), an adaptation of Julius Caesar, bear testimony to other Kerala versions of Shakespeare.

India has not always been fully subservient to the “Shakespearean” setting and performance codes. Quoting the famous Indian critic Jyotsna Singh, Fischlin and Fortier observe that the inter-culturalism with which Shakespeare is associated in India has led to a process in which “native cultural forms often undergo a complex process of transculturation” (13). In such a context, an inquisitive mind will be sceptical about the Indian
mind’s acquiescence to the "Shakespearean meaning". This problem comes to the fore in the analysis of Kaliyattam. A keen probe into the heart of the movie gives out the impression that it has only recreated the canonical Shakespearean meaning of Othello in a very different culture and setting.

Jayaraj is a promising film maker in present day Kerala. Born at Kottayam, Kerala, Jayaraj did his course in Engineering at Thiruvananthapuram. Inspired by films shown in film festivals at Thiruvananthapuram he moved into the field of cinema as the assistant of the master Malayalam director Bharathan. He made his directorial debut with Johny Walker, a commercial venture. Later he made critically acclaimed films like Deshadanam, Kaliyattam, Karunam and Santham. Beebhatsa, made in Hindi, is the third film in the proposed “navarasa” series. Kaliyattam (The Play of God) is a screen adaptation of Shakespeare’s Othello to the local traditional theatrical art of “Kaliyattam”, in which the actor is supposed to take on a divine dimension as soon as he wears his mask and his headgear.

Jayaraj translates not only the text but the history and the politics of the play as well. Such a “transcultural” vision of a singular human essence caters to suppressing the uniqueness and historical reality of the source culture. In order to make the theme meaningful for a Kerala audience, Jayaraj chooses the unique Kerala art form “Theyyam”, which distances
the play *Othello* from its roots and tries to universalize it. Shakespeare’s play revolves on the pivot of a contrast between the white Europeans and the Moorish General. Othello’s marriage to the daughter of a Venetian Senator is against the established hierarchical social order. The superiority of the racewise inferior Othello consists in his insurmountable valour and mastery as a soldier. When faced with the task of transplanting this theme into a culture which has no connections with the politics of racial differences, Jayaraj chooses a protagonist who belongs to the lower stratum of the society but is superior to the aristocratic class because of the god-status attributed to him by the ritualistic performance he enacts. *Kaliyattam*, as the title itself signifies, is a ritualistic dance form of Northern Kerala. To make a proper comparison and contrast between *Othello* and *Kaliyattam*, one must be aware of the various conventions and beliefs associated with “Theyyam”. It is a special form of god worship practised by the people of North Malabar.

The folk art “Theyyam” is popular in the Kannur and Kasaragode districts of Kerala and as far as Bramhavaram in Thulunadu. The main seat of this art form is the old Thulunadu lying north of the Perumpuzha river. The word “Theyyam” is a derivative of “Daivam” a Malayalam word for God. Both “Theyyam” and “Kolam” represent the same motif. In
“Theyyattam” (Theyyam dance) a deity is represented by the “Kolam”, and the “Kolam” is worshipped by the spectators. It is a form of deity worship through the medium of art. For the common rustic folk, these deities are gods to be worshipped, and they experience seeing before them the real gods who have the power to bless them or ruin them. A major share of ritualistic arts is meant to propitiate favourite gods. “Theyyattam” has this function. The concept of Theyyattam is that the deity himself makes his appearance as the dance performer. Though the kolam artist, whose dancing skill is hereditary, only enacts the deity’s role, the popular belief is that the deity manifests himself in the performer. Traditionally, “Theyyam” has been performed by people of the lower strata of the society, like Malayan, Vannan, Velan, Koppalan, Mavilan, Muthoottan, or Anjooran. These low caste people have been kept at a distance by high caste people, but when they perform the role of “Theyyam” they are revered by all, including high caste people. At that sacred moment, the spectators become quite oblivious of the performer and are persuaded to believe that the deity himself is dancing before them.

A “Theyyam” is a deity that speaks. His holy utterances are taken by people as the deity’s own pronouncements. Devotees submit before this “deity” their problems, their sufferings and their offerings. Then the “Theyyam” makes his pronouncement, and his favour gives solace to the
devotees. The “Theyyam” has the power to offer solutions for their complex problems of life. He can even settle disputes and feuds between individuals or families if all other attempts fail.

As we have already seen, these deities are believed to have the power to bless or curse. It is a traditional belief that negligence to honour one’s ancestral gods and family deities through “Theyyam” performances would cause their wrath and curse. It is feared that if these rustic deities are not paraded through Theyyam, evil would visit the land. It is, therefore, customary to hold Theyyam and Thira performances in rural temples and ancestral households every year. Such a performance is known as “Kaliyattam”. Its aim is the propitiation of some deity. Their favour would bring prosperity to the family and to the land. This belief is common to low castes and high castes alike. A “Kaliyattam” that is celebrated with great pomp and festivity between long intervals is known “Perumkaliyattam” (Grand Play). “Kaliyattam” is not a synonym for “Theyyam”. Not all god-performances are called Kaliyattam. Different opinions have emerged about the etymology of the word. “Kaliyattam” being chiefly a representation of the goddess Kali or her variant forms, it is argued that the word originated from “Kali Attam” (i.e. Kali play). Dr.Gundert in his Malayalam Dictionary explains the word as “a religious play”.
“Theyyam” is a wholly ritualistic art performance. Various ritualistic observances, like continence, action, invocation etc., are associated with it. Local lords, oracles and Kolam artists are bound to observe the purity of continence. Such strict observances aim at purifying the body and the mind and conditioning these for prompt action. “Ottakkolam” and other such fire jumping performers have to observe continence for a period of twenty one days. This is a preparation for jumping into a most perilous pile of fire. This huge fire-pile is prepared by piling up logs of highly combustible firewood, as high as twice the height of a man. A massive headgear is fitted on the head of the “Kolam” before he begins his dance. Then he looks into the mirror to see his own image. His god-figure, reflected in the mirror, makes him believe that he is the deity himself. He becomes excited. It is believed that the moment the performer puts on his headgear and sees himself in the mirror, he forfeits his human nature. This is shown in detail in Kaliyattam. Kannan Perumalayan, the protagonist, is the one who performs Ottakkolam and so he is revered by everyone.

As “Theyyam” is a visual art, it abounds in comic characters as well. The comic characters can be identified from the spathe-masque they wear. Gulikan, Paniyan and Pootham are some examples of comic characters. Iago’s role in Kaliyattam is enacted by a Theyyam artist who
performs the comic character “Paniyan”. His name in the movie is also Paniyan.

India has a rich tradition of regional and folk theatres. These are rooted in the ancient, courtly and poetic Sanskrit drama. The acting is much different from the Western style. We have Bharata’s *Natyasāstrā* which embodies the essentials of Eastern aesthetics. Indian acting is based on bhavas or emotions. When a Shakesperean play is adapted, there is the problem of whether to do it in the unique Indian way or in the Western style itself. John Gillies and others prompt us to probe into the complexity of this situation. In their opinion, the regional theatres had the aim of evoking the essence of feelings or states of being (*rasas*) through a combination of music, dance and words. They elaborate on this matter:

The principle of development was not action or *agon*, but contrast and elaboration. Conclusions were neither tragic nor comic, but reunifying and harmonizing. The folk and regional offshoots of the ancient courtly drama incorporate many of its core aspects. They are thus non-illusionistic, symbolic, presentational, iterative, accretive and celebratory (what was celebrated was a unified view of the universe). For its part, folk theatre contributed new elements: informality, improvisation, a sense of community participation, also
popular festivity. For all its adaptiveness the encounter of such a theatre and drama with the opposing Western logic represented by Shakespeare was inherently disruptive. How, then, did traditional Indian theatre manage to incorporate Shakespeare? (276)

A similar problem awaited Jayaraj also in the creation of his film *Kaliyattam*. He has produced a film in the Indian style of acting. Kannan Perumalayan is the counterpart of Othello. The role is enacted by the actor Suresh Gopi. His acting is in the genuine Indian style giving expression to the various rasas according to the emotions. It varies from “sringara” to “bhayanaka” and from “raudra” to “karuna” with the progress of the action. By thus making an actor perform a Shakespearean role in the indigenous style, Jayaraj has been successful in breaking the conventional Eurocentric patterns. One can claim that Jayaraj has subverted the Shakespearean acting patterns. At this point, one may be tempted to enquire as to what extent Jayaraj performs this subversion. There is a feeling in the field of criticism that a translation of a Shakespeare text into a film is in fact a liberation of the play from its accepted readings. The adoption of Shakespeare by the cinematic medium was, in the beginning, considered to be inherently radical and hence there was an opposition to it from the side of orthodox critics of literature. The task here is to see
whether the adoption of Shakespeare by the cinematic medium has any such inherent radical potential. If we follow Belsey’s opinion on the matter, films operate to close a work into a single dimension of significance, erasing all its plurality. Graham Holderness quotes Belsey thus:

. . . Film is the final realisation of the project of perspective staging. The framed rectangle contains a world which is set out as the single object of the spectator’s gaze, displayed in order to be known from a single point of view. . . . Through the intervention of the camera, which monitors what we see and therefore what we know, the film collects up meanings which may be lying around in the text, and streamlines them into one single, coherent interpretation which it fixes as inescapable. It arrests the play of possible meanings and presents its brilliant rectangle full of significance to and from a specific place, a single and at the same time inevitable point of view. (208)

The conclusion is that the medium of film itself acts apparently as an innocent communicator of ideology. This points to the need to interrogate the possibility of changes being made by Jayaraj.
*Kaliyattam* is the tragic story of the love between Kannan Perumalayan, the Theyyam artist, and Thamara, the beautiful daughter of a feudal land lord. In the film, Kannan Perumalayan is one who performs the “Ottakolam” which, though highly perilous, provides the artist with a supremely elevated divine position. While Othello is just a man, Kannan is given the aura of a god so as to make him prominent in his society. If bravery and mastery in battles make the black Othello superior to the white Venetians, it is the divine status of the Theyyam artist that helps the most ordinary Perumalayan to rise to the status of even feudal lords. The English title Jayaraj has given to the film is “The Play of God”, which also emphasizes the divine dimension of the protagonist. Othello’s characterization is as an exotic capable of very strange heroic deeds. He himself claims that he has experienced “hair breadth ’scapes, redemption from slavery, hills whose heads touch heaven, cannibals, anthropophagi, and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders” (I. iii. 129-45). Kannan too narrates such a very strange story of survival and heroism. He tells the story of the ruin of his entire family because of small pox. He was thought dead and was even thrown into the fire. But quite heroically he survived all the hardships, the narration of which evokes sympathy towards him in the mind of Thamara. Othello actually emphasizes his superiority of being a brave man in order to elevate himself to the status
of the racially superior Desdemona and thus win her. His “magic” consists in invoking his exotic otherness, his cultural and religious difference as well as his heroic exploits which involve strange people and territories. Kannan Perumalayan also employs the same trick to win the heart of Thamara: narrating his sufferings as well as adventures. What is generated as a result of this portrayal is the projection of the usually accepted notion that women often cherish a heartfelt admiration for “manly” and exotic deeds and sympathy for heroic agonies. This concept is something which the occident has created about the orient, that the Western white women fall in love with the brutal strength of the blacks. Jayaraj’s application of this impression about the white women to the Indian context seems like an overt claim that women everywhere across the globe and at all times nurture this admiration for strange experiences, most probably as a kind of wish-fulfilment. Ruth Cowhig locates Desdemona’s love for Othello in the context of a white woman’s fantasies for the exotic male:

. . . [ I ]s she not more attracted to the exotic myth of ‘otherness’ than to the real man? Given the enormous popularity of travel books among white women (The Earl of Shaftesbury in 1710 was to lament the fact that a thousand Desdenonas were so obsessed with stories of African men that they would readily abandon husbands, families and
country itself to ‘follow the fortunes of a hero of the black tribe’), can we not say that Desdemona was an early travel book ‘fanatic’? (13)

Her desire is understood as the white woman’s desire for the black’s manly deeds.

In 1958, Gerald Eades Bentley wrote about Othello in his introduction to the play *Othello*: “Othello is a man of action whose achievement was immediately obvious to an Elizabethan audience, in spite of his exotic colour and background, because of his position as the commanding general for the greatest commercial power of the preceding century”(17). His stature is that of a warrior. In the writings of the Renaissance period, the Moors were described as subtle, stubborn, bestial and intolerant. In an essay entitled “A portrait of a Moor”, Bernard Harris elaborates on these adjectives attributed to the Moors by the Elizabethans:

To Elizabethan Londoners the appearance and conduct of the Moors was a spectacle and an outrage, emphasizing the nature of the deep difference between themselves and their visitors, between their Queen and this 'erring Barbarian'. When Shakespeare chose, for this audience, to present a Moor as his hero, he was not perhaps confused in his racial
knowledge, simply more aware than his contemporaries of the complex pattern made by white and black. (35)

Shakespeare resorts to the stereotypes of the African, the soldier, and the unfaithful wife in working out his tragedy. Desdemona is the best example of the ideological and social construction of women as either to be revered as the virgin or reviled as the whore. The myth of the sexually potent black male feeling inferior because of the marriage to the racially superior white female is employed in *Othello*.

The tragedy of Othello happens not just because of the above mentioned proposition. The focus of the cause for the tragedy is thrust rather on the conventional male anxiety about the inscrutability of the chastity of women. Iago relies on more than glib notions of woman's frailty. He is able to insinuate that, as a Venetian, Desdemona must surely be sexually promiscuous. “In Venice they do let God see the pranks/They dare not show their husbands” (III.iii.206). Gordon Williams gives a sketch of the background in which Shakespeare makes Iago comment this way:

Venice has been ready made for Shakespeare's purpose not only through its custom of picking foreigners as military leaders, but because of social conditions which make the city a breeding ground for adultery enacted or suspected. As
William Thomas observes, in the leading families it is customary for only one brother to wed, to limit 'the number of gentlemen . . . wherefore the rest of the brethren dooe kepe courtisanes, to the extent they may have no lawful children'. And while Venice had an unmatched reputation for its courtesans, younger brothers must have been quite apt to find solace amongst the married women of their circle. (188)

Venice was notorious for its prostitutes and courtesans. There was a dangerous excess of sexual licence. Venetian women were known for their easy virtue and loose morals. Andrew Hadfield judges the situation this way:

Shakespeare makes use of this particular myth of the desirability of Venetian women, who appear to male eyes like the beautiful but deadly sirens of classical myth, luring men to their doom, in his representation of Iago's plot against Othello. Iago manages to undermine Othello's faith in his wife's virtue by suggesting that Venice is a permissive society in which adultery is tolerated, even encouraged . . .

(9)

David McPherson suggests that Shakespeare's selection of the Venetian setting of Othello is not simply an exotic backdrop. Iago is a product of
this Venetian ideology. He was educated in these manners of Venice. Venetian children were brought up in much liberty that by the time they were twenty years of age they would have acquired as much lewdness as is possible to be imagined. McPherson opines: “Iago is a true son of his native land, or at least of the negative stereotype of his native land. Because his own mind is so inveterately pornographic, he is able to use pornography to manipulate others”(81). Thus, Iago's resorting to sexual jealousy as a plausible means to bring about the fall of Othello is a comprehensible one. One must, then, analyze whether Paniyan employing the same weapon in Kannan's "Ekarajyam" can be of substantial validity.

Every text is political in as much as it is determined by the ideology which produces it. Jayaraj does not seem to be aware of this aspect of Othello or he might not have paid serious attention to it. He transplants Othello into the new culture by creating the Theyyam artist Kannan Perumalayan. But by providing his Paniyan with the same comment about the women in "Ekarajyam" as the one made by Iago about the Venetian women, what he creates is an assertion of the universality of the idea that women's chastity is never trustworthy. Paniyan even goes to the extent of saying that women's chastity is something which can never be seen with the eyes and then believed. When Shakespeare had historical reasons to create such a situation in Othello, Jayaraj has no such circumstances in
Kerala to make Paniyan do so. Like any other mainstream realist cinema, *Kaliyattam* hails its viewers to take up the position it offers as natural and obvious, something which is simply there to be accepted.

As noted earlier, Paniyan is a comic actor in the Theyyam performance. He does not even have a name of his own other than the name of the Theyyam role performed by him. He is the one who prepares the scene for the real honourable "Theechamundi". He is the butt of ridicule everywhere. He is taunted by everyone including his own "guru". Even small kids mimic him and sometimes throw stones at him. He is the exact opposite of the "Daivakkolam", the chief Theyyam performing the role of the deity, who is the centre of honour and respect. Thus Paniyan can be viewed as an equivalent to Iago who entertains a jealous attitude towards Othello. In the eyes of the white lieutenant Iago, the black moor who is the commanding general is a rival. On top of that, the white angel Desdemona elopes with such a black moor. Iago feels as if Desdemona has cheated his race by marrying out of the social norms and hence his sole intention is to ruin her. Through her marriage to Othello, Desdemona becomes a whore in Iago's eyes. It is her "perceived identification with the alien" (Dollimore 157) along with her refusal of a supposedly equal, that incurs Iago's wrath. Kannan Perumalayan is by caste an untouchable and Thamara, the counterpart of Desdemona, is the
daughter of an aristocratic feudal land lord. Kannan asserts his stature through his divine aura. If Othello is black and hence detestable, Kannan has a pock-marked face which, according to Thamara's father, is something which horrifies any onlooker. Kannan's success in life, which includes the dignity of the Theyyam played by him as well as winning the hand of the noble Thamara, makes Paniyan, the comedian of the piece, dangerously jealous.

Alan Sinfields’s analysis of the Shakespearean scripting of women is very relevant for the present study. He says:

In Shakespeare the most effective stories are given specific scope and direction by powerful men. They authorize scripts, we may say, that the other characters resist only with difficulty. Scripting from below by lower-order characters immediately appears subversive: consider Shylock, Malvolio, Don Jon, Iago, Edmund, Macbeth, Caliban. Women may disturb the system, and in early comedies they are allowed to script, sometimes even in violation of parental wishes, but their scripts lead to the surrender of their power in the larger story of marriage. Elsewhere, women who script men are bad — Goneril and Regan, Lady Macbeth, the Queen in Cymbeline. Generally, the scripting of women by men is
presented as good for them. Miranda's marriage in *The Tempest* seems to be all that Prospero has designed it to be. To be sure, these are not the scripts of men only. As Stephen Orgel remarks, the plays must have appealed to the women in the audience as well: these were the fantasies of a whole culture. (1995, 807)

Traditional critics view Shakespearean women characters as stereotypes. They do so because for them the plays are the site of the ideological structures that the culture is centred on. As noted earlier, subjectivity is an effect of cultural production. Sinfie ld continues with his comment on *Othello*:

The easiest way to make *Othello* plausible in Britain is to rely on the lurking racism, sexism and superstition in British culture. Why does Othello, who has considerable experience of people, fall so conveniently for Iago's stories? We can make his gullibility plausible by suggesting that black people are generally of a rather simple disposition. To explain why Desdemona elopes with Othello and then becomes so submissive, we might appeal to a supposedly fundamental silliness and passivity of women. (1995, 821)
The female roles in Shakespeare were written as roles for boys or young men. Women were not at all allowed to make an appearance on stage. Thus the women were represented through a male writer's concept and a male performer's body. When Jayaraj adapts *Othello* into the Indian context, Thamara is framed exactly after Desdemona. Even when adapted into a film in a remarkably different culture at such a modern time, she is still imaged as the site/sight or object of exchange between men. Following Althusser one may argue that any film is as much productive of as it is a product of ideology. As Althusser theorizes the "subject" to be a construct of material structures, the spectator too forms a constituted subject while watching a film. As a result, when watching *Kaliyattam* s/he enters into the subjectivity which was in fact designed for her/him by Shakespeare and not exactly by Jayaraj. Woman, according to Mulvey, "stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning" (112).

All relationships in *Othello* are founded on the voice. Recently there has been a critical argument that Desdemona is doomed for listening too hard and talking too much. It is as if those women who speak will be doomed. Conventionally, the power of naming reality has been a taboo for
women. Mary Ellman traces this silencing of women in the course of history:

By Talmudic law a man could divorce a wife whose voice could be heard next door. From there to Shakespeare: 'Her voice was ever soft, Gentle, and low — an excellent thing in woman'. And to Yeats: ‘The woman that I picked spoke sweet and low/And yet gave a tongue'. And to Samuel Beckett, guessing at the last torture, the worst: ‘a woman's voice perhaps, I hadn't thought of that, they, might engage a soprano’. (149-50)

The dangers of speech on the woman’s side are made clear from the start of Othello. It is claimed that the “witchcraft” with which Othello seduces Desdemona is by rehearsing “The story of my life” (I.iii.129). Desdemona displays “a greedy ear” to “devour up my discourse” (I.iii. 149-50). Othello senses the desire in her for his words ie, for his voice. She knows that as a woman it is not her right to own a voice. “She wish'd/That Heaven had made her such a man" (I. iii. 162-3). Hence her actual desire was to be a man. In its impossibility she wished at least to get such a man for herself and thus own that voice. While facing the Venetian senators, she gives voice to her desires much to their shock. Howard and O'Connor cite the opinion of Newman: "Both Rymer and Cinthio reveal how
Desdemona is punished for her desire", since it "threatens a white male hegemony in which women cannot be desiring subjects" (Howard and O'Connor 152). Speech and desire seem to be equated in Othello. Finally, when Desdemona is murdered, suffocating her breath and speech, one can see the victory of the masculine silencing.

In Kaliyattam, Thamara is so bold, like Desdemona, in the beginning that she elopes with Kannan. However, this part of the story is presented only in narration. Her first appearance in the film is as a very docile and timid one, almost like a painting which presents the conventional image of a woman. She has her head bowed almost all the time. It is notable that though very submissive in appearance, her arguments in support of her choice of Kannan as her husband are the same as the ones put forward by Desdemona. After this scene there are very few occasions where Thamara is given a voice of her own. Desdemona is presented as engaging in coquettish conversations which may be explained as a product of the already mentioned Venetian senario. But Thamara is not portrayed in any such light. She is much more of a yielding character than Desdemona. Iago’s crooked manoeuvres become successful with Othello because of the warning by Brabantio about Desdemona. Brabantio says, “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. She has deceived her father, and may thee” (I. iii. 290-91). Ania Loomba
remarks that Jacobean drama implicitly connected female disobedience with a degenerate social order, and thus contributed to silencing any notions of disobedience which actual women readers may harbour. The warning to Othello by Brabantio is retained exactly in Kaliyattam as if this is the nature and fate of women all over the world. Loomba explains the situation further:

> We need to see how institutionalised readings of Renaissance tragedy work. In this body of drama, female transgression, both real and imagined, is repeatedly and ruthlessly oppressed by the family, state, church and judiciary. Desdemona (Othello), The Dutchess of Malfi, Vittoria (The White Devil), Bianca (Women Beware Women), Annabella (’Tis Pity She's a Whore) and Beatrice Joanna (The Changeling) all break rules of female conduct and are punished. Early modern Europe witnessed the mass-scale burning and torture of women as witches, and Renaissance drama makes it clear that 'witch' is a category flexible enough to cover any sort of female deviance and rebellion. (39)

In fact, the fate of Desdemona serves the function of a warning to young girls not to marry against the wishes of their parents. In this way patriarchy unceasingly puts chains on women's freedom of the choice of
their husbands. When this highly politicized act of silencing is attributed to the character of Thamara, it commits the violence of imposing universalized models of human relationships upon the spectators. The concept of love implying female passivity also gets propagated.

Shakespearean theatre has been considered an institution of deep cultural specificity and locatedness. When it is translated into a different culture, and that too in a different medium of expression, altered techniques are necessary. Shakespearean soliloquies are well known for exteriorizing the interiority of the characters. Film has other means of doing this. Speech can even be a hindrance in this. Since it is manifestly impossible to translate the verbal metaphors into visual terms, a film version of the soliloquy must find suitable images to interpret the poetry, emphasize its philosophy or underline its irony. Leech and Margeson quote the opinion of Kozintsev about a filmic rendering of Shakespeare to show that a film based on a Shakespeare play shifts the stress from the aural to the visual: “The problem is not one of finding means to speak the verse in front of the camera in realistic circumstances ranging from long-shot to close-up. The aural has to be made visual. The poetic texture itself has to be transformed into visual poetry, into the dynamic organisation of film imagery” (191).
Peter Brook throws more light on the problems and possibilities of this visual translation of a Shakespearean play:

If you could extract the mental impression made by the Shakespearean strategy of images, you would get a piece of pop collage. . . . The background that Shakespeare can conjure in one line evaporates in the next and new images take over. . . . The non-localized stage means that every single thing under the sun is possible, not only quick changes of location: a man can turn into twins, change sex, be his past, his present, his future, be a comic version of himself, and be none of them, all at the same time. Thus, one can say that the filmic mode is truest to the effect of Shakespeare's dramatic verse. (118)

In order to portray Kannan's turbulent mental state, Jayaraj employs a number of screen images. Once Kannan gets a nightmare in which he sees Thamara and Kanthan, the counterpart of Cassio, together in bed, which reveals the extent to which the poison of suspicion has spread roots in his mind. At another situation, too much a prisoner of his doubting mind he prays to the Theyyam gods to show him a way out of his agony. A number of Theyyams approach him in rhythmic steps, but then all of
them turn back at once and move away from him without answering his prayer. On another occasion, we are shown a kolam falling down from the top of a mountain, rolling down violently and becoming motionless. This, again, is part of the imagination of Kannan which shows his fall from the heights of glory to the utmost depths of degradation. Such techniques are employed by the film genre to exteriorize the mental state of the protagonist, which would be done through soliloquies in drama. One may suspect that Kannan's fear is the fear of being destroyed by the "female". Female power is conventionally depicted as destructive of masculine power. The delineation of Cleopatra is an excellent example for this belief. Jayaraj reiterates this notion, in fact with added force in the Indian context. He knows that the Indian audience are well aware of the concept of "brahmacharya" and the richness of the power associated with it. We have many examples for this, like the myth of Viswamitra being lured by Menaka.

The belief is that the success of a Theyyam performance, especially "Theechamundi", is dependent on the purity of the woman at home. Kannan repeatedly warns Thamara about the necessity of her purity. Before he goes to perform the Theyyam, he takes hold of her hands and suspiciously observes that they are “wet”, which has a hint towards her
sexual infidelity. He says that her hands must be neither too warm nor too wet. Again, he looks into her eyes and asks her to look at him. He says that she should not have been so beautiful. He complains that he is being tormented because of her beauty. Here, the idea conveyed is that of women being enticers. One of the songs in the film vividly narrates the story of a woman who waits in earnest for her husband who is gone for a battle. One may conclude from all this that women are presented only in the backdrop of men. The renowned feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey quotes the words of the famous American film director Budd Boetticher about representation of women: "What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance". (Mulvey 116)

Cinema has a greater voyeuristic potential than theatre. The film serves more for the objectification of the character than what a play could. In Kaliyattam the way Thamara is framed, lit, dressed, etc, shows how she is a figure upon whom the male hero can fix his fantasies. She is just the object of male desire. The conventional close-ups of her face integrate into the narrative a mode of eroticaism. The camera isolates her
frequently, glamorising her sexually on display. She thus becomes a mere product, the direct recipient of the spectators’ look as well. She holds the looks, and plays to and signifies male desire. The film employs a number of songs to fill in the gaps of the narrative, which also cater to entertainment. The lyrics are beautiful, but filled with a lot of sexual connotations. The textual relations between screen and spectator have been analyzed by Mulvey in her ground-breaking essay, "Visual pleasure and Narrative Cinema":

At first glance, the cinema would seem to be remote from the undercover world of the surreptitious observation of an unknowing and unwilling victim. What is seen on the screen is so manifestly shown. But the mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy. Moreover the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one to another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to
promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation. Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world. Among other things, the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer. (114)

Mulvey’s words make it clear that the woman portrayed serves as an erotic object both for the characters within the screen story and for the spectators within the auditorium, or the movie hall.

Susan Hayward has neatly summarised the key points of Mulvey’s essay:

In this essay, Mulvey seeks to address the issue of female spectatorship within the cinematic apparatus. She examines the way in which cinema functions, through its codes and conventions, to construct the way in which woman is to be looked at, starting with the male point of view within the film and, subsequently, the spectator who identifies with the male protagonist. She describes this process of viewing as scopophilia — pleasure in viewing. However, she also asks
what happens to the female spectator, given that the narrative of classic cinema is predominantly that of the Oedipal trajectory and since that trajectory is tightly bound up with male perceptions and fantasies about women. How does she derive visual pleasure? Mulvey can conclude only that she must either identify with the passive position of the female character on screen, or, if she is to derive pleasure, she must assume a male positioning. (117)

This is exactly what happens when an Indian woman views *Kaliyattam*. She is repressed by the passive position the director has attributed to Thamara. The point of view unfolded through the story is overtly masculine and even the female spectators are compelled to take up the male position in order to be in the centre of experience. The spectators, whether men or women, identify with Othello, who is the centre around whom the film is structured. Through this identification, the spectator, too, can indirectly possess the woman on the screen.

The element of sexuality is given a more prominent thrust in the film than in the play. The conception that money can lure women even into deceiving their husbands is presented with added thrust. Paniyan keeps taking money from “Unni Thampran”, the equivalent of Roderigo,
saying that he will give it to Thamara who may be enticed because of that. The picture created here of Thamara is that of a mere prostitute who will associate with any man who has money with him. As for the the napkin in Shakespeare's play, Jayaraj introduces a red silver silk, which is believed to have some magical power. It was given to Thamara by Kannan Perumalayan on the very first day of their marriage, with the instruction to keep it with her safely for ever. He says that it was handed to him by his mother, which thus turns out to be an inheritance through generations. It is believed that so long as Thamara has the silk with her, their marital relationship will be a smooth one. But if she loses it by any chance, there is the possibility of their relationship getting shattered. Jayaraj presents the red silk like a talisman, which is an integral part of oriental exoticism. In a culture fed on the myth of Sakuntala’s predicament due to the loss of the ring presented to her by Dushyanta, Jayaraj's attribution of a magical significance to the silk is easily conceivable. (This aspect of oriental magic is mentioned on another occasion in the beginning of the film. Paniyan says that Kanthan is an expert in creating magic spells and that hence he will be able to separate Kannan Perumalayan and Thamara). In *Othello* the napkin is not given as much importance as is given in *Kaliyattam*. In the film the silk acts almost as a symbol of their sexual union. Thamara spreads it on her bed as if it is an invitation to their
union. One also gets the impression that the silk is a symbol of her chastity. The idea presented is that once she loses it, it is a pointer to the fact that she has betrayed her husband. Thamara is very conscious of its significance. She becomes highly panicky on finding that she has lost it.

In *Othello*, however, Desdemona does not give this much of an importance to the napkin.

Desdemona's losing the napkin is only a chance happening. Emilia happens to get it quite accidentally. It is Emilia's speech on getting the napkin that reveals its significance:

> I am glad I have found this napkin.

> This was her first remembrance from the Moor.

> My wayward husband hath a hundred times

> Wooed me to steal it; but she so loves the token

> (For he conjured her she should ever keep it)

> That she reserves it ever more about her

> To kiss and talk to. I'll have the work ta'en out,

> And give it Iago. What he will do with it

> Heaven knows, not I;

> I nothing, but to please his fantasy. (III .iii 293-302)
In the movie, Paniyan keeps prompting Cheerma, the counterpart of Emilia, to steal the silk. When she does not yield, he exploits her intense yearning to have children. He makes her believe that the silk is capable of helping them to beget smart boy children. Tempted thus by her husband, Cheerma deliberately steals the silk from Thamara's trunk. Believing the sexual connotations of the silk, she spreads it on the bed and waits for Paniyan. While Iago's excitement on getting the napkin is limited to "A good wench! Give it me", Paniyan becomes so highly excited on getting the silk that he acts as if he is crazy. Thus, in Othello there is an element of fate/chance which helps Iago to work out his plan, but in Kaliyattam chance has no such role. Jayaraj makes his Paniyan a representative of the typical masculine jealousy which aims at ensnaring women in order to achieve his selfish aims.

In Othello, some critics have traced an argument that Iago had in his mind an element of attraction towards Desdemona. Her choice of a black Moor when white men like him were there, was an obvious insult to him. He says,

The Moor, howbeit that I endure him not,

Is of a constant, noble, loving nature,

And I dare think he'll prove to Desdemona
A most dear husband. Now, I do love her too -
Not out of absolute lust (though peradventure
I stand accountant for as great a sin)
But partly led to diet my revenge
For that I do suspect the lustful Moor
Hath leap'd into my seat; the thought whereof
Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards;
And nothing can, nor shall, content my soul,
Till I am even'd with him, wife for wife . . . (II. i. 271-93)

Ania Loomba explains this emotion on the part of Iago this way:

In what sense does Iago love Desdemona? Does he really suspect Emilia with Othello? Rather than confusion of motive, the passage illustrates the way in which sexual desire is expressive of a power struggle, here in a specifically racist context. Iago 'loves' Desdemona in the same way as Ferdinand loves his sister, the Duchess of Malfi. In the latter case, erotic desire, brotherly possessiveness and male authoritarianism blend as expressions of aristocratic bonding, and of protection of state and family power. Similarly, Iago's
'love' speaks of a racial and patriarchal bonding whereby he becomes the 'protector' of all white women from black men. More specifically, as a white woman, Desdemona belongs to him rather than to Othello. Such possessiveness over all white women is also reflected in the fear (rationalised as 'suspicion') of losing his wife to Othello. (51)

As a result, his intention is not just to ruin the Moor who has elevated Cassio above himself, but also to eliminate the unattainable Desdemona. In *Kaliyattam*, on the other hand, there is no such implication of an attraction on the part of Paniyan towards Thamara. His sole intention is to crush Kannan Perumalayam who has demeaned him by giving him the role of a comic character and giving the power over their territory to Kanthan instead of to him. He objectifies Thamara as a vehicle for the destruction of Perumalayan, a clear example of the absolute commodification of woman. She is not even treated as a human being, but only as a bait to catch a big fish with. Paniyan's treatment of Cheerma is also of a similar kind. Her love for him as well as her desire for children is ruthlessly abused by him for his selfish motives. She is just a pawn in Paniyan's hands. Sticking to the patriarchal notion of wifely devotion, Cheerma becomes ready to cheat even her close friend. Jayaraj capitalizes
on Cheerma's desire for a baby boy thereby catering to the patriarchal anxiety of having heirs to the family. Paniyan asks Cheerma if she too does not want to have a son with all good qualities. Here he focuses on the generalized notion of women's desire to compensate for the lack of manliness through begetting a male heir.

A major cause of Othello’s tragedy is a deep-seated feeling of racial inferiority. Alan Sinfield says:

Othello is persuaded of his inferiority and of Desdemona's inconstancy, and he proceeds to act as if they were true. . . . It is very difficult not to be influenced by a story, even about yourself, when everyone else is insisting upon it. So in the last lines of the play, when he wants to reassert himself, Othello ‘recognizes’ himself as what Venetian culture has really believed him to be: an ignorant barbaric outsider — like, he says, the 'base Indian who threw away a pearl’(806).

He gets interpellated into the notorious role of a black husband being cheated by a white wife. Iago's stories work because they are true to the popular notion of a Venetian woman. In Act II scene iii, Iago makes many negative remarks about Desdemona, and Othello starts believing him:
I know our country disposition well (205)

... She did deceive her father, marrying you (210)

... Not to affect many proposed matches,

Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,

Whereeto we see in all things nature tends. (233-35)

As a human subject an individual becomes what s/he is by internalising the discourses that surround her/him from birth. Othello is repeatedly made conscious of his racial inferiority. Though his mastery as a soldier has given him a superior status, he is very conscious of his racial inferiority. In a similar way, Kannan also feels inferior to Thamara because of his pock-marked face and inferior caste. But this happens only when insinuated by Paniyan. Iago's jealousy has a very strong racial basis. But Paniyan has no such strong grounds for his jealousy. Both Paniyan and Kannan Perumalayan belong to a lower caste. Paniyan has no political or ethnic reasons and there is no white woman — black man conflicts and doubts. Even then Paniyan is successful in misleading Perumalayan because Perumalayan is a prey to the general premise that women in general are not trustworthy. This is an unwitting reification of the
belittling of all women as ever capable of unnatural transgressions. In order to emphasize Thamara's infidelity, Paniyan goes to the extent of telling Perumalayan that there are so many men who are cheated by their wives in this way without their being aware of it. Hence *Kaliyattam* presents women in a negative perspective.

In the beginning, Perumalayan has a high self-esteem. He has no doubts about himself and Thamara being a very good match for each other. He is even confident of the status of his caste which performs the Theyyam. It is Paniyan who instigates him to question his own stature. Once he is forced into self-doubt he feels himself very insignificant. He starts comparing his own appearance with that of Thamara. He does not do it verbally. It is exposed through a frequent use of mirror reflection. The film provides an insistent equation between the mirror gaze and the gaze of the anxious husband. This visual motif is not exactly required by the text of *Othello*, though perhaps suggested by it. In one scene Thamara is looking into the mirror. Perumalayan approaches her from behind and he too looks into the mirror as if to see his own face. What he actually does is a measuring of the contrast between the two faces. And he too feels that his face is something that can frighten any one, as Thamara's father had remarked. He asks Thamara whether his face looks weird. In
fact he feels that she takes him to be so. Though she asserts her liking of
his appearance, he is no longer willing to accept it. On another occasion,
when Paniyan has succeeded in making Perumalayan almost sure of
Thamara's deception, he looks into the water and becomes very violent.
Though the reflected image is not clearly shown in the film, one can guess
that it is his reflection that frightens him into believing that he has enough
deformities to be cheated by Thamara. He disrupts the surface of the
water, possibly effacing his own ugly features. Towards the end of the
film Perumalayan stares into Thamara's eyes, holding her face in his
hands. Thus her eyes replace the looking glass where he seeks an answer
for his agony. In conclusion, one may contend that like Othello, it is his
own feeling of inferiority that leads to Perumalayan's ultimate doom.
Stephen Greenblatt has argued that Iago's ability to improvise and control
events and the lives of others should be located as an effect of colonial
ideology which seeks to "sustain indefinitely indirect enslavement" by
moulding the psyche of the oppressed (229). Jayaraj makes this specific
psyche a monolithic one which is pertinent to anyone across the globe.

Critics usually agree that it is not Desdemona's innocence but her
ignorance that leads to her tragedy. In the particular situation of Venice at
that time, Desdemona had historical reasons to be ignorant. Since
Venetian women were notorious for their character, wives and daughters of noble families were kept virtual prisoners. Hence they were extremely naive, with no exception in Desdemona. She does not seem to be conscious in the least bit about masculine jealousy. She keeps pestering Othello in favour of Cassio because of the naivety of being cloistered. If Desdemona is ignorant, Thamara is visualized as even more so. Compared to Desdemona, Thamara is allowed very little speech. If Desdemona is doomed for her volubility, Thamara's ruin has not even such a cause because she is as demure as a woman can be. Throughout the film she is in the typical Kerala dress, "settu-mundu", which is a symbol of the maximum possible modesty and simplicity in a woman. When Desdemona's ignorance is a valid one, Thamara's ignorance can only be explained under the traditional notion that women are brainless souls, incapable of thought and reasoning. The way Thamara is situated in the film is really a cloistered existence, separated from the contact of other human beings. Their house itself is in an exotic setting with no neighbouring houses. Perumalayan does not allow her to talk even to women because of his jealousy. The only people she has any contacts with are an old woman named "Uduppelamma" and Cheerma, the wife of Paniyan. Perumalayan treats her like a precious possession. When some very young boys touch her palms, he gets irritated and says that he does
not like it. He keeps constant surveillance over her, thus asserting his authority over her. And Thamara seems to enjoy being possessed as is the accepted notion about women.

The political dimensions of an adaptation of *Othello* into a film like *Kaliyattam* can be made manifest only when it is analyzed in the post-colonial context of India. After the independence, generations of scholars and critics have been rallying against the post-colonial’s willing submission to the colonial representation of particular attitudes to life. Critics like Gauri Viswanathan have very ingeniously unveiled the “masks of conquest”. It is in such a scenario that a “true” adaptation of *Othello* has got national acclaim. It seems worthwhile here to mention the movie *Shakespeare Wallah* released in 1965, which was written, directed and produced by Merchant Ivory Productions. The theme of the movie is the reception of Shakespeare’s plays in post-independence India. Valerie Wayne explains the theme and intention of the movie:

It tells the story of a British acting troop called the Buckingham Players that has fallen on hard times because they can no longer count on devoted audiences to attend their performances. The political changes in India as a result of independence, combined with the rising popularity of India’s
own cinema, have prompted a largely negative reaction to Shakespeare’s plays among those who had previously received them with great enthusiasm. From a hybrid position of former British and newly independent subjects, the Indian audiences respond not only with approval but with mimicry and resistance; they also completely disrupt one performance. *Shakespeare Wallah* presents the bard’s texts as sites of considerable cultural conflict in this post-colonial context. (95)

This shows that people were conscious of the disadvantage of attributing a “universality claim” to the plays of Shakespeare and imbibing them as such. Succeeding generations of critics have also expressed a similar concern. Ania Loomba observed in 1989 that “more students probably read *Othello* at the University of Delhi every year than in all British universities combined. A large proportion of them are women” (10). This is not the case of this single university, but it happens all over India. Loomba explains further that the English literary text is still studied as an embodiment of universal value, morality, truth and rationality. Jyotsna Singh also agrees that the status of English literature still remains the same in the Indian context. She argues, “In introducing English literature
to elite Indians [then] — or in allowing them access to Calcutta theatres — the colonial rulers were not being egalitarian, but rather, were engaged in a ‘hegemonic activity’, by which, in Gramsci’s terms, the consent of the governed is secured through intellectual and moral manipulation rather than through military force” (1989, 449). The film *Shakespeare Wallah* as well as the comments by the above mentioned critics and many more like them problematize the place of the privileged Shakespearean meaning in the present India. Consciously or unconsciously, Jayaraj seems to be little concerned about such issues.

It was already stated that the English translation that Jayaraj has given for *Kaliyattam* is "The Play of God". Does he mean that, after all, this tragedy is the result of some god playing mercilessly with these characters? One can feel the density in the word "play", the endless play of meanings which deconstruction proclaims. Shakespearean rewritings are claimed to be such a “play” with the Shakespearean meaning. But there are serious doubts about *Kaliyattam* being a rerighting. What it does is only to assert the age old masculine suspicion about the “real” nature of women. Whatever the time, age and the cultural background, the fate of women seems to be the same: “Disorderly Women” will be punished. If Jayaraj had filmatised *Othello* as such, one could have argued that this is
the case only of a particular culture and possibly the problem with a particular man. But, by presenting it in a purely Indian form and setting, he has universalised its theme. Thus the term “play” in the title is a contradiction to what the film does in reality. Sinfied comments: "Among other things, *Othello* invites *recognition* that this is how people are, how the world goes" (1995, 821). *Kaliyattam*, too, serves a similar function. This view, however, is not undisputed. The famous feminist critic Diane Elam opposes such generalizations. She asserts: "*Her-story is not one story*. An injustice is committed when any *one* history purports to speak for all women everywhere, when it does not underline the incompleteness of its own narrative" (68-69).

The connections and cultural connotations derived from playing Shakespeare in his own land and in his own tongue are simply not applicable to another country, at another time and in another language. The text must be located within the coordinates of Renaissance culture. This is very important in analyzing its uses at subsequent moments of reception and reproduction. Howard and O'Connor's opinion may be brought in here:

The necessity to historicize gender constructions if one wishes to escape the oppressive notion of a universal human
nature, or, worse, of an eternal feminine, is increasingly apparent, as is the need to talk about the way race and class affect constructions of the feminine and pluralize the monolithic concept of ‘woman’. (3)

Ania Loomba’s argument on the same is also worth noting: "Othello's blackness is central to any understanding of male or female sexuality or power structure in the play" (41). She is against the erasure of this factor in any interpretation of the play. She strongly condemns the transgression of applying it in general to the Indian context: "The female reader, potentially if not actually rebellious, is silenced along with the literary creation” (34). This contrived silence of women can only be regarded as a brutal violence committed on them. In fact, this violence is committed by Kaliyattam too. Even the women spectators are compelled to internalize the patriarchal view of the doom resulting from female waywardness and a very strong injunction for wilful obedience. They are not provided with even the slightest doubt that this picture is only a conscious construction imposed upon them by the authority which wants to control them. Thus Kaliyattam, in effect, turns out to be just one of the processes by which representations of women reproduce and reinforce dominant definitions of sexuality and sexual hierarchies.
Kaliyattam is imbued through and through with dominant ideology in an unadulterated form. It acts as the unconscious instrument of the ideology which produced Othello. It turns out to be a re-hash of the same old ideology. Instead of effectively criticizing the ideological system in which Othello is embedded, Kaliyattam unquestioningly adopts its language, imagery and meaning. This is quite ironical at a time when intelligent Indian academics are questioning the relevance of so much time and money spent on the past writings of a country geographically far away and which was in fact a part of its machinery of power. The success of the film reveals the fact that the ideology conveyed is appealing to the Kerala audience too. One may say that it caters to the public demand. But it must be borne in mind that “what the public wants” quite often means “what the dominant ideology wants”. Thus we may surmise that the proliferation of the ideology is a closed circuit, endlessly repeating the same illusion.

Judith Fetterly comments on the impalpability of the designs of ideology on women:

One of the main things that keeps the design of our literature unavailable to the consciousness of the woman reader, and hence impalpable, is the very posture of the apolitical, the
pretence that literature speaks universal truths through forms from which all the merely personal, the purely subjective, has been burned away or at least transformed through the medium of art into the representative. When only one reality is encouraged, legitimized and transmitted and when that limited vision endlessly insists on its comprehensiveness, then we have the conditions necessary for that confusion of consciousness in which impalpability flourishes. (561)

Whatever other stories the text of *Othello* tells and has told various people at various times, one thing that is fairly obvious is that it tells again, and has told and told again for some centuries, the same narrative of masculinity. This violence towards women has been very assertively questioned by Terry Threadgold:

On at least one level, *Othello* is a story about a femininity which is constructed by men as a problem, written by men as deceitful, cuckolding, adulterous—as whore—as the source of disharmony and of a terrible personal and social masculine tragedy. The problem is dealt with by men, and ultimately by Othello, in the violent murder of the offending feminine, Desdemona, a murder which is again written as Social Duty
and Protection, the restoration of order and harmony. Desdemona is killed ‘Lest she betray more men’. The real source of betrayal, the masculine figure of Iago — the embodiment of patriarchal and misogynistic violence, and the narratives and discourses which produce his and Othello’s troubled and dangerous masculinities — are again erased and left intact in this protective act of violence against a woman. (128)

In performing this narrative and its discourse through various rewritings writers constantly re-embody, re-enact the misogyny of centuries of differently embodied and historically located and socially specific stories which cluster around and find new realisations in and through their adaptations. So do readers and the new performers. The narratives and discourses propagated from time to time and from place to place can never be the same, but ultimately they turn out to be so. In Othello when Desdemona is about to be murdered she has no words to prove her innocence. Othello calls her a whore and a strumpet and Shakespeare gives her no words with which to deny the accusation raised against her. The masculinity as embodied by Othello needs words or rather solid proofs like the ones he demands from Iago. But an
argumentative proof is not granted to her. An exactly similar situation is
created in Kaliyattam also. Thamara’s embodied innocence does not
defend her. Kannan Perumalayan too needs ocular proof which is the
privilege of patriarchy.

When a woman watches Kaliyattam as one who is brought up in a
patriarchal society, the voice that keeps resonating in her head is that a
woman cannot answer or that words are denied to her. Threadgold’s
opinion about a similar situation may be broached here:

What one witnesses here is the construction of that
masculinity which fears and hates femininity, is damaged by
his fears about femininity, embodies and enacts the belief
and the narrative that violence is justified in the name of
protection — but he seems less damaged because of the
patriarchal violence he is able to speak and act to deal with it.
The whole construction of masculine and feminine
subjectivity in patriarchy is rehearsed here — visibly, audibly
and corporeally. (132)

The film circulates the metanarratives of gender and domestic violence.
She adds that very different positions are needed to read as women:
A whole range of theoretical fictions are necessary, a whole range of different positions to let us see around the corners of our theories and the stories in which we are entrenched, because they are in our bodies. We have somehow to teach the pleasure of storying, and thus the desire to see what it might be like in someone else’s story, and try to understand when we get there. And we have to subvert, not fulfil, the desire for tidy endings and clear beginnings, and to stress the scientific and ethical importance of never being satisfied with half the story or with the silences in stories. Telling many stories at once may be unsettling, and not very tidy, but it may just protect you from that monologic discipline which will otherwise keep you in your assigned place, speaking in the voice of the master, remaking the patriarchal order and the generic chains which bind you and keep you there. It is certainly a strategy which is neither apolitical, nor irresponsible, nor patriarchal. It is a feminist strategy for performing a politics of gender, race and class, which will not be built on the basis of patriarchal theories, and it is a way of telling differently the story of femininity, and a
multitude of other stories, including those of masculinity.

(133)

*Kaliyattam* has not been able to question the discourse presented in *Othello*. The unsettling of the patriarchal discourse has never been in the agenda of *Kaliyattam*. The reason why the film became a popular success is that it has endorsed the dominant patriarchal construct of femininity. Had Jayaraj aimed at righting Shakespeare by righting the assigned gender roles, perhaps the film would not have received the same acceptance. Unfortunately, the film does not seem to be bothered about the need for such a righting. Perhaps, it is a result of the knowledge that acceptance comes easily when the rooted notions in the society are untampered with.