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## A Comparative Study on The Cultural Elements of William Shakespeare's *Othello* and The Indian Film *Kaliyattam*

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the cultural divergences between Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* and its Indian cinematic adaptation, *Kaliyattam*. Despite sharing a central narrative, the two works differ profoundly in cultural context, character representation, and thematic emphasis. By analyzing these distinctions, this study highlights the ways in which *Kaliyattam* reinterprets Shakespeare's classic to reflect the traditions, societal norms, and aesthetic values of Kerala, India.

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### Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Othello* is a masterpiece of English literature that explores themes of jealousy, betrayal, and racial tension. *Kaliyattam* (1997), directed by Jayaraj, adapts this narrative into the cultural and geographical framework of Kerala, India, using the ritualistic art form of Theyyam as its backdrop. While the universal themes of love, envy, and tragedy resonate in both works, the cultural lenses through which these stories are told create a vivid tapestry of contrasts. This article examines how *Kaliyattam* transposes the narrative of *Othello* into a distinctly Indian context while retaining its emotional core.

The characters in Shakespeare's work *Othello* have given an Indian cultural background for the easy understanding of the universal themes such as love and betrayal. The film *Kaliyatam* is a parallel to *othello* in this regard.



*Othello*, a tragedy by William Shakespeare, tells the story of Othello, a Moorish general in the Venetian army, and his wife, Desdemona. Manipulated by his envious ensign, Iago, Othello falls victim to lies about Desdemona's fidelity. Consumed by jealousy, Othello's trust in Iago grows as he questions his wife's loyalty, leading to tragic misunderstandings. Iago uses the handkerchief, a symbol of their love, to falsely implicate Desdemona and Othello's lieutenant, Cassio, in an affair. Othello ultimately murders Desdemona, only to learn the truth too late. Overcome with grief and guilt, he takes his own life, leaving destruction in Iago's wake.

When we come to the Indian film *Kaliyattam*, it shares a narrative core, exploring themes of jealousy, betrayal, and tragic love, but differ in cultural contexts. *Othello* is set in Renaissance Venice, where race and societal power shape Othello's downfall. In contrast, *Kaliyattam*, directed by Jayaraj, adapts the story to a South Indian Theyyam ritualistic backdrop. The protagonist, Kannan Perumalayan, mirrors Othello's tragic arc, with caste replacing race as a driving force. Both works depict manipulation—by Iago in *Othello* and Paniyan in *Kaliyattam*—leading to the protagonist's tragic misjudgment of their beloved. While Shakespeare's classic speaks universally, *Kaliyattam* localizes the drama, blending Shakespearean tragedy with Kerala's culture.

### **Cultural Context**

The settings of *Othello* and *Kaliyattam* are worlds apart. *Othello* is rooted in Renaissance Venetian society, a hub of commerce, diplomacy, and colonial expansion. The play reflects contemporary concerns about race and outsider status, epitomized by Othello's position as a Moor in a predominantly white society. Themes of otherness and integration are deeply embedded in Venetian culture, influencing Othello's struggles and eventual downfall.

Conversely, *Kaliyattam* is set in a rural Kerala village, immersed in the traditions of Theyyam, a ritual performance art that embodies the divine and the mortal. Kerala's societal structure, historically influenced by caste hierarchies and rigid social divisions, provides a localized backdrop for the narrative. The protagonist, Perumalayan, mirrors Othello's outsider status, but his alienation stems from his position within the caste system. As a Theyyam performer, Perumalayan occupies a revered yet marginalized status, embodying both spiritual power and social vulnerability. This cultural shift from race to caste transforms the dynamics of exclusion and privilege in the story.



## Character Representation

Shakespeare's Othello is a seasoned general, respected for his military prowess but conscious of his racial difference. His internal conflict is shaped by his simultaneous acceptance and rejection within Venetian society. In *Kaliyattam*, Perumalayan's character reflects a similar duality: he is a respected Theyyam performer whose spiritual role grants him reverence but does not shield him from societal prejudice.

Desdemona's innocence and devotion are mirrored in *Kaliyattam* by Karthyayani, whose character retains her Shakespearean counterpart's loyalty and tragic vulnerability. However, Karthyayani's agency and cultural nuances are steeped in the traditions and expectations of Kerala's patriarchal society. Her tragic fate underscores the consequences of defying societal norms, aligning with *Kaliyattam*'s cultural framework.

The character of Iago, reimagined as Paniyan in *Kaliyattam*, shifts from a scheming subordinate to a figure driven by caste-based resentment. Paniyan's motivations reflect the localized tensions of class and privilege, offering a culturally specific interpretation of Iago's manipulative nature. This adaptation emphasizes the socio-political undercurrents in Kerala, drawing parallels between personal vendettas and systemic inequities.

## Themes and Motifs

Both *Othello* and *Kaliyattam* explore themes of jealousy, love, and betrayal, but the cultural lens through which these themes are viewed alters their expression. In *Othello*, racial prejudice and the fear of the "other" drive much of the narrative tension. Othello's insecurities, compounded by Iago's manipulations, highlight the fragility of his position as an outsider in Venetian society.

In contrast, *Kaliyattam* situates these emotions within the context of caste discrimination and Kerala's rigid social structures. Perumalayan's jealousy and eventual downfall are not merely personal tragedies but also reflections of a society entrenched in hierarchical norms. This shift underscores the universality of Shakespeare's themes while rooting them in a distinctly Indian milieu.

The motif of the handkerchief in *Othello*, a symbol of fidelity and love, is replaced by a Theyyam crown in *Kaliyattam*. The crown, emblematic of divine authority and cultural heritage, imbues the narrative with



spiritual and symbolic depth. Its loss signifies not just a breach of trust but also a desecration of cultural sanctity, adding layers to the story's emotional resonance.

Kaliyattam employs a distinctly Indian aesthetic, using vibrant colors, music, and Theyyam performances to convey emotional and thematic depth. The ritualistic grandeur of Theyyam, with its elaborate costumes, fiery dances, and spiritual fervor, serves as a visual and narrative anchor. These elements contrast sharply with the austere settings of many stage adaptations of *Othello*, which rely more on dialogue and minimalist staging.

The film's use of Malayalam dialogue, regional music, and local customs further grounds it in its cultural milieu. Director Jayaraj's choice of cinematic language bridges the gap between Shakespearean drama and Indian storytelling traditions. The interplay of light and shadow, the use of close-ups to capture emotional intensity, and the integration of Theyyam performances enhance the film's dramatic impact, offering viewers an immersive experience.

### **Comparative Analysis**

While *Othello* and *Kaliyattam* share a common narrative, their cultural reinterpretations highlight the adaptability of Shakespeare's works. *Othello*'s focus on race and otherness is replaced in *Kaliyattam* by an emphasis on caste and social stratification. This shift not only localizes the story but also broadens its thematic scope, allowing it to resonate with diverse audiences.

The transformation of characters, settings, and motifs underscores the fluidity of cultural adaptation. Perumalayan's struggles, though rooted in Kerala's societal norms, echo *Othello*'s journey, demonstrating the universality of human emotions and conflicts. Similarly, the reimagining of Iago as Paniyan reflects the interplay between individual ambitions and systemic inequities, offering a nuanced critique of power and privilege.

### **Conclusion**

*Kaliyattam* is more than a mere adaptation of *Othello*; it is a cultural reinterpretation that transforms Shakespeare's tragedy into a story deeply rooted in Indian traditions. By transposing the narrative to the context of Theyyam and Kerala's societal norms, *Kaliyattam* offers a unique perspective on universal themes, showcasing the adaptability and timelessness of Shakespeare's works. This comparative analysis



underscores the richness of cross-cultural storytelling, highlighting the ways in which literature and cinema can transcend boundaries to explore shared human experiences.

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