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Modernity and “Monstros/city” in *Othello* and Nassirian’s *Halu*

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Abstract

The so-called “third world” has often experienced modernity and its version of the “city” in some of their most grotesque forms where Iran has not been an exception. In other words, North-Atlantic powers have historically played the midwife for a father-figure-like modernity and its “third world” concubines, the result of which has been the birth of “monstrosities” of all kinds. Focusing mainly on the Iago-Roderigo-Othello trio in *Othello* (ca. 1603–4) and the relationship of a titular hero and those who besiege him in *Halu* (1963) by contemporary Iranian dramatist Ali Nassirian (b. 1935), the present article contextualises these play-texts and tries to examine the broader social frameworks which gave rise, amongst others, to socio-economic, political, and cultural contradictions. Whilst each of these dramas may be seen as the product of the distinct version of modernity which informed it, the article puts forward the thesis that *Othello*, as the epitome of Eurocentric modernity, is *only seemingly* a “domestic” play addressing a “micro-politics of transition” in the West from feudalism to capitalism; the play’s major undercurrent, the article further argues, concerns a wider “macro-politics of empire-building” by the West which subsequently dictated overall modernisation routes to peripheral, hence underdeveloped, countries like Iran. The article also sees Nassirian’s work – which, to follow Adorno’s theorising, at the level of form manifests many social contradictions prevalent in post-“White Revolution” Iranian society—as an instance of a “lopsided” modernity

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stemming from Iagoesque/Faustian projects orchestrated by these powers to lead *all* the “moors” by the nose.

Keywords: modernity, city, feudalism/capitalism, Iago, Roderigo, Halu

Polemical Introduction

The main argument of this article rests on the hypothesis that, historically as well as socio-economically, turn-of-the-seventeenth-century England and post-White Revolution Iran offer grounds for a comparative analysis of *Othello* (ca. 1603–4) and *Halu* (1963) as two textual products and the literary-cultural manifestations of these “early modern” cities.¹ However, there are differences in the kind of modernity which informs each of these period-societies – as Terry Eagleton puts it, a “time-warping which demands deeper exploration” (139)–to the extent that the result is not the self-same but *distinct* “modernities”: Iran’s “lopsided” modernity during the Pahlavi era (1925-1979), as a twentieth-century “South” social formation, was not only a poor translation of the long-term project of modernity as seen in a “North” social formation, for example in (late-Renaissance) England, but it was also a consequence of imperialist policy-wielding–itself a modern phenomenon that does not preclude the imperialist’s literary texts. As such, we argue that Iran’s programmes for modernisation in the said period had *almost always* been an indirect product of imperialist macro-politics rather than the genuine result of its own social evolutionary curve.

Of all Shakespeare’s plays, *Othello* has the closest links with the Muslim world, particularly because the moor plays the role of “the weakest link” in the transforming context of the drama. Perhaps this is one major reason that “Shakespeare industry” has surreptitiously produced this play to address some political, ideological, and socio-cultural issues arising from the confrontations and/or negotiations between the cross and the crescent. Although the bulk of the existing criticism has focused on the relationship between Iago and Othello, by inserting a “marginal(ised)” Roderigo and re-creating through their trio the “real” dynamics of the text, the present article will read Iago’s “engendering of monstrosity” as central to Britain’s later “Faustian” scenarios in dealing with countries which were peripheral to its empire, including Iran. We will further illustrate that the *Iago-factor*³–as embodied in, for instance, Lord Curzon (1859-1925), viceroy of India (1898–1905) and British foreign secretary (1919–24) as well as the author of *Persia and the Persian Question* (1892)–is an undeniable element in imperialist policy-making. Throughout Western colonialism, the colonised countries were viewed as both ideologically

otherised and economically profitable. If the former, the *Othello-factor*, justifies beneficent imperialism through the exigencies of the “white-man’s burden,” the *Roderigo-factor* funds the imperialist’s intrigues by providing enough capital. It is a combination of such static characters as Othello and Roderigo – best epitomised by the protagonist of *Halu*–or the *Othello-Roderigo complex* that, as the “other” of the Iago-factor, contrapuntally defines and simultaneously augments it whilst also presenting the best prey to it. From this vantage point, the empire did materialise one of Iago’s speculations as the “Third World” people have indeed been historically “led by the nose / As asses are” (*Othello*, 1.3.383-4). That is how our political reading conceives of Shakespeare’s play as “a recipe for neo/colonialism.”

Our focus, therefore, will be on Iago’s performative skills and especially his opportunist language that renders his characterisation appropriate enough to develop into one of Britain’s preliminary drafts for rehearsing the empire-building project that extended to the twentieth century. Lodovico’s last two lines which conclude the play– “Myself will straight aboard: and to the *state* / This heavy act with heavy heart *relate*” (5.2.380-1; emphasis ours) –are quite telling: the couplet, whose form is not incidental, seals *Othello*’s seamless message about the significance of the “centre” and underlines the play’s preoccupation with the formation of the modern state in Western Europe, itself being an indication of a fully-regulated modernity. *Othello* is a site where Britain’s *micro-politics of transition* from a feudal to a/n mercantilist/early-capitalist system–expressed through the vassal mindset of Roderigo and the rise of Iago’s entrepreneurial mentality as well as emerging cultural attitudes toward ethnicity, marriage, and sexuality–and its *macro-politics of empire-building*–indicated by the ongoing military conflict in the Mediterranean–converge. The said micro-politics of transition, in which Roderigo simultaneously plays the roles of an investor and a vassal, will be of special significance here.

On the other hand, Nassirian’s *Halu* is a play which coincides with the Shah’s land reforms in Iran and his statist modernisation programme–under the political slogan of a White Revolution⁶–which was hardly more than an importation of Eurocentric ideas and implementation of imperialists’ policies. We argue that the eponymous character, Halu, is the product of a historical moment when Iran enters *its* phase of transition from feudalism to modernity,

and Tehran, an example of a neo-colonial city, becomes the hub of this “monstrous birth.”

Whilst *Halu* has no direct reference to foreign influences, we read it in the light of the semi-colonial dynamics with which Iran had been tangled up, and in which imperialist powers, notably Britain and Russia, played a major Iagoesque role. Therefore, one may argue that these powers’ micro-politics of socio-economic transition is later transferred to their macro-politics of empire building as especially demonstrated in the case of Iran. According to Foran, much as “internal social movements” were agitating against and seriously threatening the Iranian monarchy, “foreign powers” were thwarting these efforts and supporting the state (196). For example, in the early twentieth century:

[The] counterweight to these social movements came less from the Iranian state than from the British, who made a bid for hegemony with the change of government to the Soviets in Russia. ... Lord Curzon ... with great knowledge of Iran, “dreamt ... of creating a chain of vassal states stretching from the Mediterranean to the Pamirs and protecting, not the Indian frontiers merely, but ... communications with [the] further Empire. . . . In this chain of buffer states . . . Persia [Iran] was to him at once the weakest and most vital link”. (Foran 197)

In fact, from the eighteenth century on Iran had to remain as such: that is, the weakest link—an “investor” but also a *loser* in the network of Russo-British interests.

Shakespeare’s England in a Period of Transition

Margot Heinemann, elaborating on Brecht’s views regarding Elizabethan society, argues that Shakespeare and his Elizabethan contemporaries historically lived between the two spheres of “declining feudalism and nascent capitalism” and, as such, stood for “the conflicts and clashes of values of that moment.” This decline was characterised by Shakespeare as tragic, whilst new claims were made by the new, increasingly powerful middle classes who, with their “individualist ethos,” wanted to face up to feudalism and climb the social ladder as boldly as they possibly could. From the feudal standpoint these demands in liberated “love” (Antony and Romeo [and, we may add, Roderigo]);

in enlightened ways of “thinking” (Hamlet); in insubordinate “freedom” (Brutus); in political “ambition” (Macbeth); and in heady “self-regard” (Richard III) were fatal. From the bourgeois standpoint, on the other hand, the age-old feudalist constrictions were suffocatingly elitist, and the possibilities of the new life they were envisaging would eventually triumph (Heinemann 231). Interestingly, a brief look at the above list reveals that Iago shares in most, if not all, of these new, bourgeois demands, and that is why he has been called, amongst others, the “villainous Italianate “New Man”” (Watson, “Tragedy” 330).

“England poised between feudalism and capitalism, and on the verge of revolution” (McAlindon ix) should necessarily be located within a period of great social, economic, political, and cultural instability. This instability, as Smith observes, is best depicted through one of the age’s popular literary genres – tragedy:

The most potent ‘renaissance public symbolism’ lies in the tragedies, where the pervasiveness of the public symbols unites these plays into extended metaphors in which the theatrical world becomes the equivalent of the social and political world of the seventeenth century. (26)

She goes on to link the “popularity of tragedy”—as she notes, a form almost non-existent during culturally stable periods—to the “socio-cultural instability” of Elizabethan/Jacobean England, concluding that tragedy “may be studied as an index to that instability” (ibid).⁸ In this regard, *Othello* is a landmark in that it addresses Britain’s domestic *and* international issues both in the same play.

This instability, already underway through most of the sixteenth century and especially during the reign of Elizabeth I, was accelerated with the ascension of the Stuarts at the beginning of the seventeenth century (Smith 26). According to Agnew, “by the beginning of the seventeenth century, wages had fallen to their lowest level in three centuries, whilst geographic mobility had surged to what was perhaps its highest point” (Agnew 52), which significantly contributed to the social change in progress. As Loxley reports, by the late-Elizabethan period London had already become a “thriving metropolis.” Its population which was approximately 50,000 by 1550, jumped with an average

annual growth of 4-5 per cent to 85,000 in 1565, and by 1603, it had more than doubled to 180,000. London's population boom was the result of excessive migration from the countryside since over the course of these years the birth rate always fell short of the death rate (Loxley 5). As "northern Europe's foremost commercial site" and "financial centre," London was becoming increasingly wealthy, and the traditional "nobility and gentry" and the rising merchant class were "each attracted to the opportunities represented by the other." This marriage also provided enough opportunities for the lower classes employed in the service sector to add to their numbers at a significant rate (ibid 7). As a consequent, the "influx" from all this unbridled migration and expansion "produced a radical transformation" in the social fabric of London (ibid 5). However, the City as the centre of the emerging Empire had set its sights on transcending all the traditional boundaries, and interestingly this is symbolised by the coincidence of our symbolic date of 1600—that is, the turn of the seventeenth century—with the establishment of the notorious East India Company.

Also in the same period, an immanent crisis of faith started an ideological conflict and thus spiced up the cauldron of change. As Kenneth Muir puts it:

At the beginning of the seventeenth century the right conditions existed: a universal Christian society, but with some of its basic tenets called in question by intellectuals; a realisation that qualities which make for [worldly] success are not the basic Christian virtues; and the beginnings of a conflict between science and faith. (140-1)

The turn of the seventeenth century, therefore, embodied not only a rising feudalist vs. capitalist tension but also a nascent conflict stemming from uncertain religious sentiments, itself symptomatic of yet another conflict: a spiritual vs. material and a moral vs. intellectual dilemma.

The latter dilemma originated, according to Kott, from a comprehensive divergence between "the moral order and the intellectual order" which has been perceived to be present in almost all Shakespearean dramas, "from *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* onwards ... up to ... *The Tempest*" (99). These frictions resulted in a violent "earthquake" where we witness the simultaneous fall of twin "human orders": "the feudal hierarchy of loyalty, as well as the naturalism of Renaissance" (ibid 92). This metaphorical earthquake was so powerful and penetrating that it came to permeate even the dramatic language – especially

towards the end of the plays – and finally spiralled out of control into an abyss of absurdity. In the words of Kott, “[a]ll kinds of rhetoric have been smashed to pieces. And so have people. Othello, like King Lear, like Macbeth in his last scene, has found himself in the area of the absurd” (ibid). The resultant rift became long-standing; the world of Shakespeare did not seem to “regain its balance after the earthquake” any time soon and “remained incoherent” (ibid 99). Therefore, if we accept “the notion that subjective selfhood was being (re)invented at this historical moment,” then the transition period we have been talking about was also a time of “existential inauthenticity” (Watson, “Tragedy” 330).

Out of all Shakespearean tragedies *Othello*, in particular, produces the end result of all these crises and – once purged of its operatic and melodramatic elements–“become[s] a dispute between Othello and Iago;⁹ a dispute on the nature of the world” (Kott 87). Therefore, socio-economic and class-based rivalries, religious uncertainties, and moral as well as intellectual predicaments led to a profound dynamics of transition that gradually came to affect (almost) every aspect of people’s daily life.¹⁰ It was the age of Shakespeare and his contemporaries which became a seedbed for all such tensions. Indeed, in the words of Dollimore, “[h]istorians often remind us that ... “the real watershed between medieval and modern England” was the period 1580-1620” (*Radical Tragedy* 272-3).¹¹

Group Dynamics of Characters in *Othello*: Iago vs. Roderigo

There is a particularly noticeable difference between Shakespeare’s *Othello*, and his source, Giraldi Cinthio’s *Hecatommithi* (Venice, 1566): In the latter, “[t]here is no equivalent to Roderigo” (Ridley 246). Brennan, amongst others, views the welcome addition of Roderigo’s role as “one of Shakespeare’s most important modifications of Cinthio’s novella” (146), but why?

In characterising Roderigo, we suggest that Shakespeare had the representative of a particular up-and-coming social class of his native England in mind that, carefully fashioned, he inserted into the texture of *Othello*’s plot. Roderigo is apparently wealthy, but he is not welcome in Venetian high society and, as Desdemona’s suitor, has already been rejected by her aristocratic family.¹² Therefore, it is unlikely that he should come from the landed gentry

despite the fact that he has some land, in addition to cash and jewels, to give to Iago. Considering the strong history of trade and mercantile economy in the Republic, Roderigo is in all probability an “upstart” merchant who has also invested in property, shares the same aspirations as does the emergent bourgeoisie but, as a former vassal, still *thinks in feudal terms*. Such a portrait, though based partly on an English model, would as well fit Venice, which was rife with similar commercial classes.¹³

Brennan notes how such an important character (Roderigo) is “kept rigidly separated on stage from those in whose life he is enmeshed”: Desdemona, “the object of his desire”; Othello, “the object of his envy”; and Cassio, “whom he is persuaded to murder.” Appearing in seven scenes and being on stage for about 1,000 lines – after bringing the news to Brabantio in Act I, Scene i – “he utters less than a dozen words to characters other than Iago”; in six of these scenes, “he is on stage alone with Iago for over 350 lines.... For the other 600 lines ... he is almost entirely mute” (146). Roderigo’s formal isolation further highlights his social subordination as he is a mere vassal and an insignificant chessman in the overarching scheme orchestrated by Iago.

Opening the play, Roderigo’s first sentences immediately strike an interesting note: “I take it much unkindly / That thou, Iago, who hast had my purse / As if the strings were thine, shouldst know of this” (1.1.1-3). The discourse on money and the importance of capital – signified by “purse” – plays a conspicuous role in the forthcoming scenes (particularly in one of Iago’s most sinister utterances: 1.3.329-61). But soon enough it is Iago who propounds his new manifesto of the “master and slave” and their *topsy-turvy* relationship in the dawning age:

Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave,
 ... doting on his own obsequious bondage,
 Wears out his time much like his master’s ass
 For nought but provender, and when he’s old, cashiered:
 Whip me such honest knaves. Others there are
 Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,
 Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,
 And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,
 Do well thrive by “em, and when they have lined their coats,
 Do themselves homage. These fellows have some soul;
 And such a one do I profess myself. (1.2.45-55)

According to Kott, the appellation “demon” for Iago is “an invention of the romantics”; instead, Iago represents an “empiricist” and a “contemporary careerist” just like Richard III:

Of course, Iago is a machiavellian, but machiavellism merely means for him a generalized personal experience. In reality there is only egoism and lust. The strong are able to subordinate their passions to ambition. One’s own body can also be an instrument. Hence Iago’s contempt for everything that benumbs a man, from moral precepts to love. (86)

Interestingly, towards the end of Act II, Scene i, whilst characterising Cassio, Iago partly portrays himself, stumbling upon the “careerist” note: “[A] finder of occasion, that has an eye can stamp / and counterfeit advantages, though true advantage never pre- / sent itself, ...” (2.1.235-7).

Roderigo, the “poor trash of Venice” (2.1.290), is the *surplus* that must be ingested by the city so that the latter may thrive. Although he has his purse to offer, his feudal frame of mind makes him a “weak” investor, and in the free market of the city he is soon overpowered by Iago’s successful enterprise. His purse alone can buy him neither gentlemanly standing – the sort of wife he has *speculated* on and *invested* in – nor the astuteness to be saved from bankruptcy. In Ridley’s words, the poor, “‘gulled gentleman’ ... has a sad life in the play, bled white by Iago, disappointed of his hopes ... a pathetic figure, ... with a few flashes of petulant spirit, but trying to swim in a sea too rough for him...” (lxvi).

In the next one-on-one encounter with Iago, where Othello and Desdemona have left together to spend “but an hour / Of love” (1.3.297-8), the crestfallen Roderigo bemoans his desire to drown himself. Here we can easily see the stark contrast between Roderigo’s static and Iago’s (endo)dynamic character, or rather the latter’s *protean personality*. Roderigo speaks of “fond” love and “virtue” whilst Iago, preferring a “baboon” to a *selfless* man – one who does not know how to love himself, and whose drowning “for the love of a guinea-/ hen” (313-4) is no more than drowning “cats and blind pup-/pies” (330-1) – says: “Virtue! a fig! ’Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. / Our

bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are garden- / ers; ... /... the power and corrigible authority ... / lies in our wills” (316-8; 321-2).

In Iago’s view there is no virtue – both in its Christian sense and in the sense of some fixed character trait: instead there are *virtues of a different order* –that is, a “will” to power and ambition which would not be stopped over matters of “sensuality,” of “our raging motions, our car-nal stings, our unbitted lusts” (325-6). “It is merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will” (329), according to Iago, which people call “love.” Once again, Roderigo’s feudal attitude betrays itself in his “parodic” revival of the medieval cult of courtly love.

There is an interesting point here, according to Easlea, regarding the “dramatic transformation of human thought” during the Renaissance (1). Whereas a century or so before the composition of the play literate people thought of themselves as utterly subjected to “(supernatural) forces beyond their control” and also persistently dogged by the Devil’s villainy, a century or so after its composition, the same educated class of society generally found themselves beyond the menace of such metaphysical influences and confidently asserted their own will and “power over the natural world” (ibid). Thus the turn of the seventeenth century becomes a *central axis* for our micro-politics of transition, which now includes a scientific-intellectual aspect as well. In *Othello*, it seems as if Roderigo and Iago belong to each of these opposite extremes – the symbolic dates, of 1500 and 1700 – respectively.

Iago’s classic celebration of capital, with its memorable line “put money in thy purse,” can as well be regarded a rhetorical strategy: no less than 10 times in the course of some 30 lines he utters the same statement and/or related variations. Approaching the ballad form, especially through the repetition of the refrain-like “put money in thy purse,” the passage seems to be playing upon the pre-modern part of Roderigo’s personality. Ballads, commonly associated with mediaevalism, usually go back to the childhood period of a nation, and the simplicity of their language as well as their structural parallelism tend to have a lulling effect on the audience. In this instance, it is as if Iago, having analysed Roderigo’s mental disposition, intends to mesmerise the latter’s infantile imagination. When Roderigo has his exit, Iago continues:

Thus do I ever make my fool my purse –
For I mine own gained knowledge should profane
If I would time expend with such a snipe¹⁵
But for my sport and profit. (365-8)

Just similar to Mephistopheles as Berman has described him, Iago, “with his eye for the main chance, his celebration of selfishness and his genial lack of scruple, conforms pretty well to one type of *capitalist entrepreneur*” (Berman 72; emphasis ours). He is the crooked dealer, catering for all kinds of business and masquerading under as many guises as possible. He abuses the other characters based on their own dispositions: playing upon their weaknesses (Othello, Cassio); maintaining their illusions (Roderigo); and not least, perverting their strengths (Desdemona, Emilia). Iago

[A]llies himself with the ‘Turk’—by the play’s metaphor, the enemy of Christian civilization—within each Venetian: with Brabantio’s racism and sexual possessiveness towards his daughter; with Roderigo’s wastrel spending, illicit lust, and cold-blooded violence; and with the vanity, hostility, and lust accessible in Cassio through the devilish “spirit of wine.” (Watson, “Tragedy” 332)

In addition, Iago is an effective publicist, brilliant in delivering convincing speeches with the right words, tone, and facial expressions, which are better realised in the play’s productions.

Yet one last point is worth touching upon. Towards the end of Act II, Scene iii, Iago talks to Roderigo of the importance of hard work, good patience, and slow time:

How poor are they that ha’ not patience!
What wound did ever heal but by degrees?
Thou know’st we work by wit and not by witchcraft,
And wit depends on dilatory time. (343-6)

These maxims are too troublesome to ignore, and as Watson argues in “*Othello* as Reformation Tragedy”—though his emphasis is on a different aspect of Protestantism – that “*Othello* evokes ... Protestant values, dogma, and anxieties” (Moisan and Bruster 11), one is inclined to remember Weber’s thesis that Protestant virtues, as here voiced by Iago, had a profound influence on the evolution of modern capitalism and the spirit of commercialism (Weber 8-28).¹⁶ As Weber puts it, “Calvinism seems to have a [close] affinity with *the*

tough, upstanding, and active mind of the middle-class...capitalist entrepreneur" (95; emphasis ours).

Moreover, in the character of Iago throughout the play we can discern the same "reserved calm of [Puritanism's] devotees" as much as the "self-control which is found in the best of English and Anglo-American 'gentleman' today" (Weber 81). In other words, Iago shares as much with Puritan martyrs as with the WASPs of Weber's early-twentieth century: "Puritan asceticism—like any "rational" asceticism—worked to enable man to demonstrate and assert his "constant motives" ... against the "emotions"—in other words, to *train* him to become a "personality" in *this* strictly psychological sense of the word"; in order "to be able to lead a watchful, aware, alert life," therefore, "[t]he most urgent *task* was the eradication of *uninhibited* indulgence in instinctive pleasure" (ibid). Here, the difference between Iago's *constant, self-controlling, and scheming* personality against Roderigo's *untrained, uninitiated* character and his "*uninhibited* indulgence in instinctive pleasure" is most arresting (here we may very well recall Iago's lines in *Othello* 1.3.316-29). However, what distinguished "Calvinist and medieval asceticism" was the "transformation of asceticism to a purely *innerworldly* variety" (ibid 82). Quite similarly, Iago seeks no otherworldly salvation, keeps a low profile, and restrains his pleasure instincts so that he may climb the social ladder as quickly as he can.

Also, as Weber goes on to elaborate, the new "spiritual aristocracy" of God's elect *in* the world, which was bolstered with the inculcation of the Calvinist "doctrine of predestination," was "separated from the rest of reprobate humanity by a [fundamentally unbridgeable] gulf." Therefore, the predestined elect of God could do nothing to help the predestined damned, or "enemies of God"; in fact, the more appropriate attitude towards the latter was that of "hatred and contempt" (83). Similarly, Iago hates those outside his nobility of nerve and brain, the unintelligent (Roderigo, Othello), and those unworthy of what they have been given only through birth (Desdemona, Cassio). He hates them, is cynical of everybody—and at times, of his own—as the God-fearing Calvinists were suspicious and contemptuous of "their neighbours' sinfulness . . . who [bore] the mark of eternal damnation upon them" (ibid). Here, too, Iago shares as much with Calvinists of yore as with card-carrying McCarthyists of 1950s America.

Therefore, it is in Iago's personality and capacity as a "capitalist entrepreneur" that Calvinism, as a mechanism for *innerworldly* devotion, is phenomenally put to work. At the same time, as the ensign Iago is the

standard-bearer of the Republic’s troops (Maguire 48), by virtue of which he can also be reinvented as an instance of “individuated” mercantilism/early capitalism of Venice. Thus the grand scheme is “ingendered. Hell and night / Must bring this *monstrous* birth to the world’s light” (1.3.385-6; emphasis ours).

If we approach *Othello*’s characters from the viewpoint of certain “personality types” as discussed by Piotr Sadowski, we will soon end up with interesting results. The nature of these types is decided by “one of the stable properties of character” called the “dynamism of character,” which ultimately “determines a person’s general strategy of behaviour, motivation, goals, and needs” (Sadowski 9). In *Othello*, the Moor is categorised as “essentially static and heroic” (ibid 166) and his ensign as an “endodynamic opportunist” (ibid 185). Static personalities, “well adapted to particular circumstances of life,” are described as “usually uncritical, unquestioning, and often rigid” in adhering to laid-down norms and rules in a certain “socio-cultural context”; nonetheless, they “become psychologically interesting in times of crisis, that is, when the external situation changes to such a degree as to [dis]able a static person to follow the rules and norms that normally ensure mental balance and stability” (ibid 164). Although Sadowski simply ignores Roderigo, it would not be difficult to argue that he, too, is another “static” but *stupid* character. On the other hand, Sadowski continues, endodynamic characters yearn “to obtain more sociological power.” In Iago’s case, “his endodynamic thirst for power, control, and material gains is combined with his ... organizational skills and passion for action” so that he achieves a larger-than-life “psychological breadth” (183) which at times gives him a certain “superhuman quality” (184).

Back to our trio, thus the endodynamic Iago is able to stand on a higher ground from which he can manoeuvre his way across the lives of Othello and Roderigo, who, in a way, may be no more than the opposite sides of the same staticity: Roderigo as a domestic and Othello as an ideologically otherised representation of the same feudal essence. If Shakespeare’s England is properly understood as one of these “times of crisis,”¹⁷ the cognitive and psychological unfitness and the social inefficacy of the likes of Othello and Roderigo—also Halu, as we shall see later—for the emerging age and its “new economy,” whether of goods, thoughts, or words, will practically seal their fate. Therefore, such static characters cannot help but be wiped out by their antithesis: Iago.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer see Sir Francis Bacon as the herald of enlightenment in general and of the Enlightenment in particular. But, once the dark side of these phenomena – the state of mind as well as the historical movement – rises to the surface, Iago becomes both the human incarnation of this dark/er side *and* Bacon's alter ego; that is, the Bacon-Iago binary becomes the Janus of enlightenment. As such, Iago embodies the desire for "domination for the sake of domination alone." Probably this is the long missing link which should reconnect Coleridge's thought to ours where he describes Iago's famous soliloquy as "the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity," which seems to be another way of saying *domination for the sake of domination alone*.

Group Dynamics of Characters in *Halu*: Halu and the Forty Thieves

Ali Nassirian started his artistic career in 1950 by playing minor roles in local plays and, by 1956, had earned a degree from Tehran Acting Conservatory. In the same year, he wrote his first two outstanding plays—*Bolbol-e Sargashteh* (The Wandering Philomel) and *Af'ee-ye Tala'ee* (The Golden Viper). Soon he started directing as well as acting in his own plays and TV scripts in addition to adaptations from Molière, Chekhov, Shaw, Gogol, and Steinbeck, among others. In 1962 Nassirian went to the United States on a scholarship to further diversify his skills as a dramatist, and a year later published his first, and subsequently revised and enlarged, collection of plays *Ketab-e Tamashakhaneh* (The Book of the Playhouse; reissued 2005). In 1971 he had his first major cinematic experience with Dariush Mehrjui's world-acclaimed *Gav* (The Cow), which gradually led him to a prolonged career as a cinema and TV celebrity.

Also in 1963 Nassirian wrote *Halu*.¹⁹ The play's *dramatis personae* include Halu ("simpleton"), Rind ("cynically smart", the innkeeper),²⁰ and the Whore, as the three main characters. There are two minor but nonetheless important characters as well: a conman—who disguises himself as a beggar, a seller-of-Hafez-poems, a fortune-teller, and also a knife seller—and Dash ("tough guy"). The action is set entirely in a shabby inn in the suburbs of south Tehran. The plotline runs as follows (Nassirian 155-89):

Halu, with a *parvenu* air and bizarre motley clothes, stands in front of the inn. Rind invites him in to join the festive atmosphere. He cons his guest into ordering as much as possible whilst Halu thinks he is getting these favours for free and takes it as a sign of urban hospitality. The conman

appears four times during the first scene, each time masquerading as a different person to take advantage of Halu’s *naïvete*. The latter, although uncomfortable with the conman’s likeness to his previous appearance(s), pays him dearly as Rind assures him they are all different people. As his trust in Rind deepens, Halu reveals that he is a minor civil servant from a far-flung corner of the country and has come to Tehran so that, just like many of his white-collar fellow townspeople, he may also find a suitable wife. Presently, an attractive girl (the Whore) enters and greets the innkeeper familiarly. Halu asks about her, and Rind hints at the possibility of their spending the night together. All the whilst, the latter has been telling Halu to take it easy and seize the day....

The second scene shifts to Halu’s bedroom in the inn. Night has already fallen:

Halu is shown his room, but he is impatient to tell Rind there is a matter of great import he wants to tell him about later in the morning. Shortly, the Whore enters and starts flirting with Halu. He awkwardly insists he must first talk to Rind (whom he takes to be her father) and then suddenly blurts out his real intention: he wants to formally propose to her. Once out of her clasp, he rushes to Rind and finally speaks his mind; Rind tries to undeceive him, but Halu returns even more insistent.²² The Whore says she cannot marry him since she is but a mistress. Then suddenly a loud voice is heard downstairs: Dash – the Whore’s lover and a bully – has come to visit her. Challenged by Halu, Dash is forced to floor him first to get past. Disillusioned, Halu prepares to leave, but here he is demanded to pay the fortune that by now he owes the house. Jolted into a bitter understanding of how the world around him works, Halu goes out, watching as the inn musicians prepare to leave. At his bidding that he would willingly hire them, they start playing in the dead of night.

Residents of the inn pour out to protest, and Dash repeats his threats. Undaunted, Halu asks the Whore and the innkeeper a couple of unsettling questions, then hands a knife—which he had bought from the conman earlier—to Dash. The musicians start again and the three exit together. The last tableau shows an empty stage, with the cage open and no bird inside.

What specifically strikes us, the first time we read *Halu*, is that the play's "leading man" is "led by the nose / As asses are".²³ The *parvenu*, almost clownish, air around Halu is indicated by his choice of offensively gaudy clothes as well as his posture; his blithe sense of bewilderment before the city-dwellers and especially at the point where he is recounting his petty adventures in the city to the Whore; his "bookish Persian partly to hide his provincial accent, using a stilted and highflown linguistic register to which he is unaccustomed and which is totally inappropriate to the situation" (Fischer 200), in contrast with the language of all the other characters (Rind's sophisticated colloquialism, the Whore's teenage flirtatiousness, and Dash's violent vernacular); his *naïvete* in the "ways of the world," most notably in his encounter with the Whore; and last but not least, his relentless gullibility in being swindled out of his money. He is in his own way the dull-witted country bumpkin of the English Restoration comedy, an unsophisticated loser who frequently happens to be a Puritan (as Halu has his own puritanical side too).

And then his real motive to have come to the city is discovered:

RIND. You're in Tehran to have some fun?

HALU. Mmm, to some extent, yes ... you know, sir, I haven't chosen a wife yet ... so ... I said I had better come to Tehran, perhaps I could settle down....

RIND. I see, congrats, congrats ... you got some kinsfolk over here then?

HALU. No, sir ... I have no relations in Tehran, whatsoever.

RIND. Then how come you decided to come here and get hitched, pal?

HALU. Well, since all my colleagues had come here and married their wives in Tehran so I thought ... you know it has become the norm with us civil servants to....

RIND. Got you ... you did the right thing, very well done....

(Nassirian 165-6; translation ours)

It is this mulish persistence to pursue his “love-illusion” in the face of calculated, mounting deceit that argues Halu out of a clichéd Restoration-comedy type and groups him with Roderigo; and where the latter is devoured only by Iago and his full-blooded campaign, Halu knocks on the gates of the city only to find that “all that is holy is profaned,” and that, like Ali Baba, he is caught in the midst of *forty thieves*.²⁴ In a “neo-colonial” city such as Tehran,²⁵ the rampant urbanisation develops an “informal economy consist[ing] of urban services and products provided by the neo-colonial city’s poorest denizens, the petty hawkers, the shoeshine boys, the household help, the rag pickers, and others who form a class of petty commodity producers and sellers”.²⁶ The conman, too, is a type of the criminal disposition who may combine as many of these roles whilst he tries to hit the jackpot through chicanery. Being so, he blights Nassirian’s Tehran in mid-twentieth century as much as he does Melville’s or Twain’s America in the nineteenth.

An examination of *Halu*’s *dramatis personae* and what their behaviour reveals show that their “state of material progress” is not accommodated by their “state of mind,” and this is one reason behind the deformity of their modernity. Although there are conspicuous signs of mechanisation and modern technology as well as the new, urbanised habits of going about everyday life which have made their way into these characters’ lives—even Halu, coming from a far-flung corner of the country, know enough about these things to impress his townsmen—still they are *all* unfamiliar with the new, modern way of thinking and of “conducting one’s life.” From an economic point of view, if they prowl around Halu, it is only for some short-term gain and some petty plunder; there is no thought of a “long-time investment” in Iago’s style,²⁷ or any vestige of the *spirit* of bourgeois capitalism; it is merely the “acquisitive instinct” of a “precapitalist’ era” (Weber 14) for Rind, or a desperate survival strategy on the part of the prostitute or (even) the conman.²⁸

Reading between the lines, one of the play’s minor characters—“Foreign Tourist” – proves an exception. He is not given any specific lines to speak – the actor may improvise some small talk himself – but the way his clothes are described can be invested with certain significance: he is wearing a pair of shorts and a tourist hat, chewing gum, smoking a pipe, singing some song, and, last but not least, holding a short stick in his hand. As such, Foreign Tourist fits

in with the traditional depictions of the “colonial adventurer,”²⁹ his “short stick”, or rather *baton*, standing for his special socio-political status and distinguishing him from his surrounding “inferiors.” He is merely passing by the inn in the first act when, spotted by Rind, is forcibly invited to buy drinks and also some of Rind’s kitch souvenirs. Faced with the innkeeper’s unrelenting insistence, he cannot help but laugh at the latter’s characteristic rapacity and enter the inn.³⁰

Foreign Tourist can be thought of as an “overseer” of the *exported project* of modernity and its inevitably *lopsided version* as concocted for the so-called Third World. His symbolic presence in the play-text indicates “the *Occidental other*,” or rather the “otheriser”, i.e. the agent of domination. In other words, it reminds us that he is not that far away after all; that he is even *physically* lurking somewhere around us, and this is on top of his already-established political, economic, and cultural supremacy. It only gets more interesting when we see all that Rind’s entire inn has to offer him are a “carpet” and an “agate ring,” both being pretty much *raw materials* – in this case, handicrafts which are, technically speaking, less worked out and closer to their natural state on the industrial continuum. This, too, symbolises the economic position of Iran in relation to the West at the time of the play’s composition: (hardly more than) “a peripheral supplier of raw materials” (Foran 7).

If we focus upon Iago as the central character, *Othello* becomes a play on the transcendence of the “naturalist” who, to borrow from Strindberg, “wants nothing but happiness—and for happiness strong and sound species are required. ... the old ... nobility [is] now giving way to the nobility [“virtue”] of nerve and brain” (95). Roderigo is neither strong or sound, nor possessed of a well-developed personality; he has neither nerve nor much brains. Similarly, Halu dramatises the tragedy of the underdog in an underdeveloped country, typifying the same tragic legacy of romanticism of which Strindberg has spoken. A former vassal like Roderigo, Halu, too, still thinks in medieval terms. None of them is fit enough to survive the machinery of the new rising order, and, once caught, they go down quite easily.

Still there is a grotesque element in the phantasmagorical tableaux of *Halu* absent from *Othello*. This can partly be explained through the fact that moving from *Othello* to *Halu* involves a generic change from the tragic to the comic. However, the grotesque element goes beyond simple comic gestures – the Iago-Roderigo encounter has its own comic side too³¹ –and, on a deeper level, points to the *underlying tragedy of the surface comic situation*. If, as we pointed out earlier in relation to turn-of-the-seventeenth-century England, tragedy were

“the most potent ‘renaissance public symbolism’” (Smith 26), a proper vehicle to convey the contingencies of that historical juncture, then grotesque comedy verging on the absurd—a fit companion to what Berman calls the socio-political “theater of cruelty and absurdity” (76)—would perform a similar function in the case of postcolonial and/or neo-colonial South social formations; or, in Fischer’s words, such play-texts are instances of the “Comic Pains of Urbanization” (199).

For example, when the conman disguised as a beggar comes on crutches and Halu pays him out of sympathy, the stage instruction reads:

“The musicians are playing a very upbeat tune. When the beggar gets close to them, he stands straight without the use of his crutches and starts dancing. Rind, the musicians, and the waiter all laugh at this scene. Halu is totally confused but has to laugh nonetheless. Using his crutches again, the beggar limps out of the inn.” (Nassirian 160; translation ours)

Or later in the second scene, when the Whore asks Halu whether he watched the film *Yusuf va Zoleykha* [Joseph and Potiphar’s wife] whilst he was in the city, we see them only moments later enacting a “parody” of Joseph’s failed seduction with the Whore gripping Halu’s coat and bidding him to stop being a *halu*.³²

WHORE. [*grabs him by the collar.*] Where are you going, *halu*?!

HALU. [*petrified.*] How ... how do you know my name?!

WHORE. [*surprised.*] Is your name “*halu*”? [*he nods.*] Is your name “*Halu*”? [*he nods again as she bursts out laughing.*]

HALU. Of course, not on my ID card, but my friends are kind enough to call me that....” (ibid 179; translation ours)³³

Roderigo takes the bait when he lets Iago have his purse—“[a]s if the strings were [Iago’s]” (1.1.3)—jewels, and land so that he can have Desdemona “procured” for him; Halu does the same, though on a much smaller scale, when he is helped to sniff out the Whore unknowingly so that he would stay longer

and go on a destructive spree, which indicates the captivating glamour but the deeply uncongenial atmosphere of the city. As an *upstart* merchant, Roderigo has bought into the idea that money is the new genie by means of which he can do everything. However, his status as a social climber is not approved of by the Venetian elite, including Desdemona's father, and lacking Iago's mastery and art, he cannot survive the new order he himself is part of—though being only an insignificant cog in the machine. As such, Roderigo and Brabantio, both, must go down. Likewise, Halu thinks his financial rise amongst his own small-town people has also legitimated his aspirations for the city, which turns out to be an illusion, as his material state is not matched by his regressive state of mind. Unlike what Fischer believes, Halu subscribes, at least halfway, to “commercialized social relations (paying for ‘friendship’ and ‘love’)” (201); his problem is that he has not learnt the consequences of this commercialisation, and once he sheds that skin, he goes back sad but educated.

Halu, therefore, is a descendant of Roderigo who stumbles on a pack of modern-day “jackals” bringing him to their den and scavenging on his medieval corpse.³⁴ However, there are differences in the representations of Roderigo and Halu which to some extent can be traced back to the playwrights themselves. Whereas Shakespeare leaves Roderigo to himself to be crushed under the wheels of history, Nassirian instils a thin authorial presence into Halu. Nassirian's dramatic character gets repeatedly disillusioned until at the end the authorial presence makes itself heard. Just before the end of the play where everybody is roused, protesting at the untimely music, Halu, in Fischer's words, “confronts each character with his or her corruption” (201):

HALU. [*looks directly into the WHORE's eyes.*] Are you not the same person who wanted to sell her body to me but couldn't agree to a chaste and decent marriage? [*The WHORE assumes a chaste gesture, wrapping herself in her chador.*] This gesture doesn't make it go away! ... [HALU *looks directly into RIND's eyes.*] Are you not the same person who blew with the wind, taking advantage of me the best he could? (Nassirian 188-9; translation ours)

The intention behind this fairly brief moralising gesture goes back to the author and his generation who were highly influenced by socialist realism in literature and art as well as a self-consciously “committed” criticism of culture and society. In such intellectual atmosphere, Nassirian could not utterly do away

with an appropriate moral for his audience, and as a result the same authorial gesture is seen throughout his plays of the period. At the end of the play, as an incomprehensible change of mood has come over Halu, he disappears offstage and into the night to the sound of the fading music. The stage instruction reads: “*In the end, the bird’s cage is seen again; its door open, there is no bird in. The curtain falls*” (Nassirian 189; translation ours).

Contemporary Iran and the So-called “White Revolution”

In analysing Iran’s sociology of underdevelopment, Foran draws on the work of Immanuel Wallerstein, the American theorist who sees sixteenth-century north/western Europe as the cradle of capitalist world economy (Foran 3-9). With its consolidation and expansion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a fierce post-Napoleon Europe whose political economy was based on utilitarian egoism, social Darwinism, and imperial expansionism sought master-slave relation with the rest of the world, including Iran. The Tsarist Russia was not less fierce in its dealings with Iran. As a result, Iran turned into a “buffer state” between these imperialist powers, becoming an operational theatre for their macroeconomic policies, especially during the reign of the emasculated Qajar dynasty (1794-1925).

Foran argues that within such a “global framework ... a dependent or underdeveloped capitalism is the lot of most Third World nations.” Following Wallerstein’s lines, he goes on to observe that this “modern world-system” develops a “core of strong states” that exploits a major part of “the international economic surplus” – a “periphery” comprised of fickle “stratum of states exploited by the core” (6). Iran’s integration into this capitalist world-system first starts as an “external arena in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,” then continues “as a peripheral supplier of raw materials in the nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries,” and eventually as a fickle player “between the periphery and semiperiphery in the postWorld War II period” (ibid 7). In this last phase, the West’s grip on Iran gets even tighter as the Soviet Union, that had its political presence in Iran first through the CPI (Communist Party of Iran) and then through the Tudeh (“Masses”) Party, enters the Cold War with the West, and especially the United States.

Also in the same phase Iran undergoes a deep, far-reaching transformation that radically traumatises its traditional social order: The White Revolution of the 1960s. This statist modernisation programme aimed at turning the tide of underdevelopment and growing national discontent had serious impacts on people's social relations with one another. As Daniel observes, due to the new American factor in Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's decision-making,³⁵ he "sensed that the newly elected Kennedy administration favoured 'progressive' leaders in developing nations and thus began to promote a degree of liberalization in Iran" (157). The Shah—"that world-class pseudo-Faustian" (Berman 77-8)—"attempted to co-opt the drive for social change through his own "Revolution of the Shah and the People", better known as the White Revolution" (Daniel 157). One of the most far-reaching measures taken was "the 1962 Land Reform Act ... *potentially the most important example of social engineering ever undertaken in Pahlavi Iran*" (ibid; emphasis ours).³⁶

Owing to the wide-ranging effects of the 1960s' land reforms, according to Foran, in just over a decade the traditionally embedded mode of production (crop sharing) was forced into a "capitalist" agricultural mode, which had "dramatic" and "decidedly negative" impacts (318) and as a consequence the agricultural sector's share in the economy fell from 50 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) in the 1940s to a pitiable 9.2 per cent in 1977-8 (323). Also, the economic phase directly following the land reforms (1963-73) was:

[A] period of transition to a more thoroughly capitalist economy with the land reform doing away with most sharecropping arrangements and steadily growing oil revenues used to initiate a somewhat deeper industrialization process ... [mostly] *of an assembly type*. (Foran 317; emphasis ours)

In only quarter of a century which coincides with the Shah's return to power until he was ousted once and for all – that is, from 1953 to 1977/8 – gross national product (GNP) jumped from 3 to 53 billion dollars which, in per capita terms, translates into more than a dozen-fold boost,³⁷ and, in the period 1963-78, the rate of GDP's average annual growth approximated to 11 per cent (Foran 318).³⁸

The White Revolution, having created a national economy on steroids, resulted in a *sudden change* in ideas, habits, customs, and the legal relations of the producer in large sectors of urban and particularly rural populations. New

ways of communication with the urban areas and the distribution of unprecedented wealth—itself a direct consequence of land reforms, oil revenues, and, therefore, an instance of *false* growth—brought about a massive influx of fashions and norms from centres of supposedly “high” culture, such as Tehran, and consequently an escalating demand for cultural entertainment was created. All these factors were in turn reinforced by the spread of basic literacy amongst the younger generations and provincial population, the culmination of which being not only an economic but also an *almost overnight cultural shift* in their lifestyles.

Further “urbanisation and the [evermore] changing composition of the labour force” (Boroujerdi 149)³⁹ culminated in an unexpected division of labour—the artificial and unbalanced occupational specialisation and social stratification of Iran’s persistently traditional society. The “vast bureaucracy of the civil services,” according to Foran, was ominously growing so that after 1963 and in less than a decade it more than doubled (314),⁴⁰ and by 1978 – on the eve of the Revolution – they equalled 12 per cent of the national workforce (316).⁴¹ The proportion of the urban population grew from 31 per cent in 1956 to 47 per cent in 1976. Tehran became the “epicentre of this demographic explosion ... a sprawling primate city larger than the next dozen cities combined,” which could well double its population in less than a decade (ibid 318)⁴² and turn into a perfect example of a neo-colonial city.

All this dependent capitalism and statist modernisation points to an undeniable process which Berman calls “pseudo-Faustian” development,⁴³ where the “tragedy” of Faustian development, in the West, is downgraded into a “theater of cruelty and absurdity” in so-called Third World societies (71-86),⁴⁴ and in which, historically, the Western imperialist powers are scandalously implicated. And one may legitimately ask: where does Halu stand in the midst of all this lopsided statist modernisation and unbalanced social stratification? A common civil servant,⁴⁵ he still earns a fortune in contrast to the less privileged of his small town, who, deprived as a direct result of agricultural mechanisation and growing division of labour, either live below poverty line as landless peasants or migrate to urban slums as cheap labour. Thanks to the onset of new ideas from “the centre of high culture,” i.e. Tehran, his clothes ape the best of the day, and he travels for pleasure, having now

come to the city both to enjoy its “wonders” and to “marry up” so that he could attain a higher social standing back home; however, as Fischer puts it, it appears that he has “fallen into the urban sewer” instead (201).

“Alternative” Conclusion

For Baudelaire – whom Walter Benjamin viewed as “a poet of high capitalism” (qtd. in Frisby 6) – the “epic quality of modern life” was primarily an *urban* phenomenon: “scenes of high life and of the thousands of uprooted lives that haunt the underworld of a great city ... are there to show us that we have only to open our eyes to see and know the heroism of our day” (Baudelaire 106). At the turn of the twentieth century, Wagner attested to this relationship by observing that “the most modern of that which is modern ... are indeed our metropolitan cities” (103), thus locating modernity as most visible within the boundaries of the (metropolitan) city (Frisby 3). The city had become “the site of concentration and intensification of modernity” (ibid 10), acting as a catalyst for the phantasmagorical operations of the modern life. In short, modernity together with capitalism as its mode of production and economic organisation demanded *their* new Mephistophelean site to operate within and through: that is, the “city”. Frisby, inspired by Berman, sees the roots of this phenomenon and our notion of the city in the “late Renaissance around 1500 and its successive phases” (6) which historically fits in well with the formation of the capitalist world system in north/western Europe.

Taking into consideration all that has gone before, Roderigo and Halu seem to belong to a precise historical moment where their social orders are in transition from one socio-economic phase to the next. In the logic of mercantilism/early capitalism and the first steps towards societal modernisation, they do not fit into place, and their phantasmagorical experience in/of the city is a testament to their inefficiency. Their mediaeval mentality and staticity of character threatens to jam up the rest of the cogs in the regulatory machine of modernity and bankrupt them all. The city, where the modern profit-making machine enjoys high concentrations of capitalist forces, seems to be the best site to also dump these dregs of the system.

The difference between the largely analogous representations of Roderigo and Halu illustrates the distinct modernity that informs each of their native social formations. Roderigo is ingested by Venice. There is no hint in the play that he is nostalgic about the feudal past; he is the outcome of social changes—only he does not know the rules of the new game. In this process, Iago, as an

instance of individuated capitalism and the human Mephistopheles – “the spirit that negates all” (qtd. in Berman 87)–serves the city best⁴⁶ through his performative skills and opportunist language, as later on it becomes his seeds’ turn – grand manipulators such as Lord Curzon–to assist the Empire in a similar vein (though on a much larger scale).

On the contrary, Halu laments the loss of bygone values, and the author begs us to sympathise with him towards the end of the play. In other words, Nassirian creeps into the skin of his nostalgic character and, by so doing, the play shifts from dramatic action to rhetoric. From one point of view, this might be Nassirian’s way of reacting to years and years of domestic dictatorship under corrupt and imperialist-serving dynasties, directly sustained by foreign interference every now and then, as well as to the continual exploitation of his country by various imperialist powers. After a bitter confrontation with shades of Iago, Halu experiences an awakening that seems to be the author’s desperate prescription for a native audience in their fight against internal *and* external oppression.

Furthermore an interesting difference exists between the type of forces that conquer Roderigo and Halu, respectively. The former is destroyed through Iago and his *centralised* powers of cunning and execution. Contemporaneous with the formation of the modern capitalist states in north/western Europe, the characterisation of Iago implicitly stresses the importance of the “centre” and “centralisation,” even when it comes to the usually repressed and destructive elements within a society. Absolutism and the consequent centralisation are basic steps in the transition from a feudal order to the modern socio-political formation. It garners scattered individual energies and redirects them all to one common goal, concentrates political as well as economic forces, and consolidates one national ideology, all of which result in relative order and concomitant progress. All this happens before power and responsibility gradually devolve on the constituents and the state is systematically democratised, because under stubbornly absolutist states a handful of strong urban centres would abnormally grow at the expense of provincial margins. But Halu is engulfed in “bits and pieces” of villainy by a band of petty comen, who *instinctually* devour their prey rather than work in reasoned co-operation whilst supervised by a centre. As such, it can be a tacit reference to the problem

of socio-political centralisation in Iran, from the late eighteenth century on, which either had never happened properly or, through the pressure of the imperialist, degenerated into possessive dictatorships and, as an economic side-effect, given birth to a *monstrosity* like Tehran.

From another point of view, there is more to texts like *Othello* than first meets the eye, particularly when they are produced for audiences coming from the other side of the “North-South” divide. The otherised cannot help but identify with the Moor’s familiar status within Venetian society any more than the formerly colonised can help but empathise with Caliban; a society rich in petrodollars and preyed on by imperialist powers, as Iran under the (late) *ajar* and Pahlavi dynasties, sees itself best portrayed in Roderigo and finds the “incubus of Iago” too close to home. The problem/secret is that there seems to be no alternative but to receive these characters as such and reconstruct one’s historical, “Third World” self in their image. In the majority of cases the inevitable result, whether intended by the reproducing Culture Industry or not, is at the least to prepare audiences, on a subconscious level, to accept their allotted roles and/or shares. On certain rare occasions nonetheless, there might be an attempt to seek an alternative, and such seems to be the case with *Halu* and its shift of tone towards the end.

Yet the very ending of *Halu* illustrates the spirit of Nassirian’s age. Unlike England, Iran was afflicted by failed social reforms one after another—the Constitutional Revolution (1905-11) followed by the ambivalent dictatorship of Reza Khan Pahlavi; Mosaddeq’s Nationalist Movement foiled by the US-backed *coup d’etat* of 1953; and the land reforms of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in the 1960s, as an offshoot of imperialistic macro-politics, proving illusory and destructive for the common people in the long run. As such, Iran, a South social formation, languished in a futile imitation of alien(ating) models of progress, having scarcely seen a natural, *self-modernising* era of its own – except under “programmes of authoritarian modernization, characterized by rapid social change and etatiste economic development” (Cronin 4)—before being thrust into the next age beyond. “Postmodernity without an evolved modernity to be consequent to,” Eagleton concludes, “is thus increasingly [the] destiny” of a Third World society “as belatedness gives birth to a form of prematurity” (139). That is why the Iranian intelligentsia generally opted for “elegy” as an expression of their social disillusionments⁴⁷ which is itself symptomatic of a precocious *and* chronic social melancholy. In this regard, *Halu*’s ending is not an exception. Whereas in *Othello*, as mentioned earlier, Lodovico finally

restores order and the play ends by his promise that he will “relate” everything to the “state” (5.2.380-1), Halu ventures into a blurred future which testifies to the chaos and the atrocities consequent upon a lopsided modernity and largely orchestrated by Iagoesque and pseudo/Faustian visions of remoulding the world.

Notes:

1. North and South social formations do not share the same history, at least in terms of socio-economic development. Modernity as a general trend and the capitalist mode of production, urbanisation, industrialisation, etc. came to the former centuries before they were set in motion, largely by the state and most often than not through the influence of foreign players, in the latter. That is why comparing these processes in England at the turn of the seventeenth century and in Iran in the middle of the twentieth century ought not to seem out of place.
2. “The colonial processes which helped, for both good and ill, to deprive [so-called] third-world societies of a developed modernity have now largely yielded to the neo-colonial processes whereby those still partly pre-modern formations are sucked into the vortex of the West’s postmodernity” (ibid).
3. The Iago-factor and the “Iagoesque” are closely intertwined terms. The latter is not simply pure/purposeless evil; it is that category of evil which comes from the human desire for power and, its correlative, domination. For a recent, controversial treatment of the concept of “evil,” see Eagleton (2010). Uncharacteristic of a radical materialist thinker, however, even Professor Eagleton relegates Iago to unmotivated evil (as distinguished from “wickedness” which, in his view, would serve some purpose), and that is why one of the objectives of the present study would be to *not* overlook this particular meaning of the Iagoesque.
4. Iago embodies the early capitalist logic of market economy which was/is bent on all-out competition and, ultimately, the solipsistic erasure of the other. He takes to extremes the new “liberal” view of the human that, as in his case, could lead to pathological individualism and, subsequently, be put at the service of slavery and colonialism. Ever since fashioned by Shakespeare, manifestations of Iago’s unconscionable liberal individualist ethos have been embodied on the Anglophone world stage in fiction or reality. Whilst vicious manipulators have always been around, the combination of Machiavellian ends and Mephistophelean means seems to have been made available in post-Renaissance English literature best through Iago. Yet little attempt is made to retrieve him from the romantic shadow cast over his character. To historicise Iago would be explaining his past-to-present trajectory (which can be pivotal to any encyclopaedic understanding of the Iagoesque and encompasses Iago’s Hellenistic and/or Hebraic heritage from antiquity through the mediaeval times right up to the late Renaissance); more important/relevant to our world-political experience is to map the

- path of destruction in his footsteps and identify where/when/in what capacity the Iagoesque has been concretised which would entail explaining Iago's iconic significance "during the period of extraordinary European [Western] ascendancy from the late Renaissance to the present" (Said 7).
5. All quotations from *Othello* are based on the version of the play appearing in Stephen Greenblatt, pp. 2100-172.
 6. "[A]s opposed to a socialist, or 'red' revolution" (Foran 319).
 7. Actually, as Marx acknowledges in his *Communist Manifesto*, it was one of the "revolutionary accomplishments" of the bourgeoisie that these values eventually did triumph over the *ancien regime*.
 8. "According to Albert Camus, tragedy is generated by a particular kind of historical transition: "Tragedy is born in the west each time that the pendulum of civilisation is halfway between a sacred society and a society built around man." ... [M]an "frees himself from an older form of civilisation and finds that he has broken away from it without having found a new form which satisfies him." To modify Camus' argument somewhat, certain Jacobean tragedies disclose the very process of historical transition which brings them into being" (quoted in Dollimore 8).
 9. Shakespeare gave "the unnamed ensign of [his] source the name Iago (the name of Spain's patron saint, famous for conquering the Moors)" – i.e. Santiago Matamoros: Saint James the Moor-slayer – "Iago's role, as destroyer of Othello, the Moor of Venice, is thus cued by his name; word matches thing, his behaviour supports the sign" (Maguire 48).
 10. Harold Laski has vigorously captured this new world-view:
By 1600 we may say definitely that men are living and working in a new moral world.... There is a new social discipline which finds its sanctions independently of the religious ideal. There is a self-sufficient state. There is an intellectual temper aware ... that a limitation to the right of speculation is also a limitation to the right to material power. There is a new physical world in the geographical sense and the ideological. The content of experience being new also, new postulates are needed for its interpretation. Their character is already defined in the realm of social theory no less than in those of science and philosophy. This content is material and of this world, instead of being spiritual and of the next world. It is expansive, utilitarian, self-confident. It sets before itself the idea of power over nature for the sake of the ease and comfort this power will confer. In its essence, it is the outlook of a new class which, given authority, is convinced it can remould more adequately than in the past, the destinies of man. (57-8)
 11. Our symbolic date of 1600 marks the 1580-1620 axis here again, and, as it will be seen in the next section, it acquires further significance.
 12. A short introduction between Brabantio and Roderigo speaks for itself: "RODERIGO. My name is Roderigo. / BRABANTIO. The worser welcome" (1.1.95-6)!
 13. In order to picture a partly-English, partly-Venetian Roderigo, we have to negotiate between the histories of both England and the Republic of Venice and give the Republic some of the characteristics that England still had at the beginning of the seventeenth century, such as the existence of fiefs, vassals, etc.; characteristics that were no longer

familiar in a blooming Renaissance trade center such as Venice. Also, as a prototypical example of both a mercantile and an administrative city, Venice can act as the optimum surrogate for Shakespeare’s London.

14. Of two separate utterances: 1.3.329-51 and 1.3.354-61.
15. A “game bird hunted in marshy areas” (Brennan146).
16. Although in Watson’s argument, Iago has been “theologically” associated with Protestant representations of the Catholic threat, still, from a *socio-economic* point of view, his feverish espousal of worldly affairs, especially the pursuit of economic gain, runs against the traditional doctrines of Christian religious devotion as manifested in Roman Catholicism.
17. “[A]s Raymond Williams has reminded us, we find in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama ‘a form of total crisis’: in the “formal qualities of the dramatic mode ... real [i.e., historical] social relations were specifically disclosed”” (Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy* 3).
18. Given the symbolic nature of Iago’s name (see Note # 9), it is not really out-of-the-way to imagine how modern-day Iagos would love to read its creator’s name also symbolically—“Will I am – the one who shakes the spear (and/or the poor)!”
19. A film version, *Agha-ye* [i.e. Mr.] *Halu*, was produced in 1971, directed by Dariush Mehrjui, in which Nassirian plays the leading role.
20. The word *rind* is both a noun and an adjective in Persian with a whole range of nuanced meanings not easy to pin down; nevertheless, “cynically smart” can be an acceptable approximation. In this regard, Fischer observes:
A term popularized largely through the poetry of Hafez, *rind* is one in a series having to do with ambiguous cleverness. In Hafez, as also in Jalaludin Rumi, the *rind* is associated with wine drinking, free spirits, and with true understanding beyond conventional social constraints or formal religious rules. For others the *rind* is merely a drunkard, skilled thief, or ruffian, deceiving, cunning, and quick to see how to take advantage of a situation. (200)
21. As a type, “dash is typically a mature man who exercises his strength in a paternal, protective role for the women, children, and weak of his neighborhood” (Fischer 200). As such, it is clear that Dash is only a parodic and actually an anti-heroic version of what he is supposed to be.
22. “Halu knows full well that she is a prostitute and is nonetheless proposing marriage, on the condition that she wash herself with the “water of repentance” (There is special religious merit in marrying such a woman if she repents by following a particular ceremonial form.)” (Fischer 201).
23. As said of the Moor by Iago (*Othello* 1.3.383-4).
24. The tale of “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” is one of the most famous in *The Thousand and One Nights* (aka *The Arabian Nights*). The prismatic dispersal of these

- forces in *Halu* – in contrast to *Othello*, where they are concentrated in the locus known as Iago – is a very interesting point to be discussed in “Alternative” Conclusion.
25. For a very useful review of city types, see Richard G. Fox’s article, “urban culture,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, especially under the subheadings “The mercantile city” for Renaissance Venice and London, and “The neo-colonial city” for (twentieth-century) Tehran.
 26. “The common image of these people is highly pejorative: they are marginal to the city, usually unemployed and often criminal, unmotivated and dysfunctional to urban life, characterized by a ‘culture of poverty’ that, at the same time, makes them accept their wretched condition and keeps them in it” (“urban culture”).
 27. Especially his lines in *Othello* 2.3.343-6, as mentioned earlier.
 28. As Weber observes, “the ‘auri sacra fames’ of the Neapolitan coachman or ... the *craftsman* from southern Europe or Asia, expresses itself ... far more *aggressively* and certainly more unscrupulously” than their capitalist counterparts. In fact, “[t]he *absolutely* unscrupulous way they assert their own interests is a typical characteristic of [those] countries, whose capitalist ... development has remained ‘backward’.” The lack of a *capitalist conscience* is actually “one of the main obstacles to their capitalist development” since “[c]apitalism [proper] has as little use for the undisciplined ‘liberum arbitrium’ type of worker, as it has for the businessman who is simply unscrupulous in his *outward* conduct” (14-5; the last emphasis is ours).
 29. This looks very much like the comical hero of *Pampalini Lowca Zwierzat* (1975-1980) [“Pampalini the Animal Hunter”], a Polish cartoon broadcast in Iran (translated as *Zebel Khan*) that subsequently became immensely popular. The idea is that the central character here and the minor character in the play both reproduce the image of the colonial adventurer in the minds of their (once colonised) audience. For more information, see “Alternative” Conclusion.
 30. One may go even farther as to claim that Nassirian is trying to picture Foreign Tourist as the representative of the coloniser who is smiling not just at Rind’s ludicrously stereotypical behaviour (for more information, see Note 28), but also at the peculiar fruition the project of modernity has been brought to in Iran.
 31. Both of them in a way resemble comic characters – Morality’s Vice and Iniquity for Iago, and the “gulled gentleman” and the “country bumpkin” for Roderigo – rather than “properly” tragic figures.
 32. In Persian, “simpleton, hoodwinked loser” (an offensive term).
 33. As another example, Fischer notes that *Halu*’s opening lines “alert the audience to the parody on *ta’arof* that will follow ... The [R]ind says [to Halu], ‘Please come in, this is a simple d[e]rvish hut’ ..., but instead of politely standing aside and allowing the guest to enter first, he turns and walks ahead” (Fischer 200). The term “*ta’arof*” refers to forms of polite discourse in Persian which allow social intercourse to occur whilst jockeying for status, conflicts of interest, or uncertainty of commitment continue below the surface”; also, as a type, “the selfless, usually aged, d[e]rvish [is] concerned more with spiritual values than material attachments” (ibid).

34. Nassirian also wrote a play entitled *Lūneh-ye Shoghāl* (The Jackal’s Den), where a bunch of miserable provincial people lodge at a deserted mansion in Tehran. The ferocious and sadistically tyrannical superintendent, who economically exploits the tenants by squeezing out the rents and at the same time subjects them to all possible physical and psychological humiliations, is himself subordinate to an invisible landlady. Here, these immigrants to the city live in a state of hysteria and sado/masochism.
35. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s “dependence on American financial aid and support influenced many of his decisions” (Daniel 157), especially after the 1953 American-orchestrated *coup d’etat* that had brought him back to the country and the throne. The Shah was reinstated through the American intervention, and, as a consequence, the new sway of the United States over Iranian internal affairs largely replaced the traditional British influence.
- However, it can be argued that there has been clear continuity between British imperialism, from the sixteenth to the middle of the twentieth century, and the United States’ status as a world superpower during much of the twentieth as well as the present century. The fact that both these sovereign states share more or less the same historical background and a very similar cultural legacy is a significant, contributory factor in the said continuity, and here the Canon of English Literature seems to play an instrumental role. Suffice it to say that it is still remembered how during the First Persian Gulf War, American servicemen and women were given Shakespeare – rather than the Bible – to help lift their spirits and/or align their personal ideas with the Establishment’s immanent ideology, underlining the Bard’s authority as a “secular Bible.”
36. Such conciliatory land reforms were nothing new, being undertaken in other underdeveloped countries such as South Vietnam at the time, at the bidding of the United States and as part of the latter’s hegemonic/empire-building programme.
37. “From \$166 a person in 1953 to [\$2,160 in 1978], raising Iran from the ranks of the lower to the medium income countries ... (though without petroleum revenues this figure would be cut in half)” (Foran 318).
38. At the time, “a figure which only two or three countries in the world surpassed, and only some five to eight did better in terms of per capita growth rate” (Foran 318).
39. Although these processes had already been underway since the 1920s (the reign of Reza Khan–1921-1941), their rates were significantly accelerated after 1963.
40. The numbers jumped from 12 ministries employing 150,000 staff in 1963 to 19 ministries and 304,000 staff in early 1970s (Foran 314).
41. There were in total some 1.2 million people employed by the state: 800,000 civilian personnel and 400,000 military personnel (Foran 316).
42. “Tehran ... grew from 2.5 million in 1970 to 5 million in 1977 ... containing 14 per cent of Iran’s entire population” at the time (Foran 318).

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43. “In the so-called underdeveloped countries, systematic plans for rapid development” (Berman 75) – which “incarnate all [of] Faust’s gigantism and ruthlessness without any of his scientific and technical ability, organizational genius or political sensitivity to people’s real desires and needs,” and, as such, are nothing but “disastrous development policies, megalomaniacally conceived, shoddily and insensitively executed” (ibid 77) – “have generally meant systematic repression of the masses” (ibid 75) and the victimisation of “millions of people” (ibid 77).
44. We may at this point recall what was pointed out earlier in relation to *Othello* and *Halu*, and the generic shift from the former to the latter that also includes an element of the grotesque.
45. “[I]n the towns, the state expanded to the point that it hired as many as one out of every two full-time employees” (Abrahamian 438).
46. Also, he plays the bad cop, taking care of the dirty work, for an innocent-looking Establishment which is paring its fingernails indifferently all the whilst.
47. There are poems called *shabaneh* – “nocturnal” – that were in vogue during this period and in which the poets expressed their elegiac attitudes towards the future.

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