Cosmetic Blackness: East Indies Trade, Gender, and The Devil's Law-Case

Amrita Sen

With the recent shift in literary studies towards what is often described as a “global Renaissance,” it is hardly surprising that figures of merchants and travelers both in early modern travelogues and plays have come under greater scrutiny as sites for understanding the formation of a fluid English identity, transnational commerce, emergent colonialism, and nation building.1 What still remains largely unexplored, however, particularly in the context of the East Indies trade, is the impact of this emergent globalization on the bodies of the European women who were closely related to the merchants or factors. While scholarship on plays such as Fletcher’s The Island Princess or Dryden’s Amboyna emphasizes the roles of both European men and their beloved native women, the white woman still remains a shadowy presence at the fringes of our current academic interest in the early modern spice trade.2

This essay seeks to address this gap by turning to the public stage, particularly to a play that explores how the emergent trade with the East Indies appeared to affect the physical and moral complexion of one such European woman. In the trial scene of John Webster’s play *The Devil’s Law-Case* (1623), Jolenta, the sister of Romelio, an East Indies merchant enters with “her face colour’d like that of a Moore,” accompanied by two Surgeons, “one of them like a Jew.” Although the assembled people quickly recognize her they still comment on her changed complexion. Ariosto the advocate exclaims, “Shee’s a blacke one indeed” (5.5.40) while Ercole, one of her suitors, wails “to what purpose / Are you thus ecclipst?” (5.5.57–58). Of course, Jolenta’s transformation is temporary and apparently superficial; yet her blackening appears to gesture towards deeper concerns regarding the impact of the East Indies trade, particularly on a woman who has never left her home or sailed the high seas to profit from pepper, cinnamon, cardamom and mace. Staged at a time when England’s domestic space had begun to alter with the steady import of foreign goods and peoples by merchant organizations like the East India Company, Jolenta’s blackface allows us to read the racial and commercial anxieties associated with such ventures, specifically the growing demand for foreign luxuries and changing consumer habits amongst women, who emerged as some of the strongest participants in the new economic circuits of the seventeenth century.

The motive for profit drives Webster’s play. Set in Naples, Romelio, the “East Indy merchant” keeps a sharp eye on his ventures in the Spice Islands and on his sister Jolenta. It is he who chooses Ercole as her fiancé despite knowing of her love for the Neapolitan nobleman Contarino. After losing his carracks in the east, he attempts to recover his ruined fortunes by claiming that his sister, still unmarried, is pregnant with Ercole’s child. Jolenta’s body appears to get conscripted to the East Indies trade, becoming a means for offsetting one set of losses, while holding out the possibility of new capital. Her appearance at the end of the play in black face, as a “Moor,” a term that could denote not only inhabitants of North Africa or the Middle East but also of India,

---

3 John Webster, *The Devil’s Law Case* (London, 1623), 5.5.20. Subsequent references this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text.
seems to suggest how she cannot escape the transformative effects of the East Indies trade. While she seems to physically change, becoming Moor, her blackening, instead of remaining an aesthetic category, assumes deeper moral and economic implications. As we shall see later, blackness in early modern England often stood for spiritual obduracy, and came to be seen as the outward mark for transgression, a curse or infection passed down from father to son. In Webster’s play it is the sister of the East Indies merchant who becomes black, but her change in complexion also reflects back on Romelio—he’s pride in his carracks laden with eastern commodities and his underhand efforts to regain his fortune after the loss of his ships. Nonetheless, as Ercole suggests, the black paint only “eclipses” her, holding out the possibility of a pristine white woman hiding underneath. Jolenta becomes a palimpsest, both black and white, both European and a Moor.

*The Devil’s Law-Case* belongs to the early phase of England’s trading engagements with the East Indies. Established on December 31, 1600 by a charter from Elizabeth I, the East India Company in many ways transformed the existing economic systems in England. Not only did the Company begin directly trading with the spice producing regions, it was also set up as one of the earliest joint stock companies. More importantly, however, the bulk of the trade was conducted not by venting English broadcloth but by exporting bullion. This departure from what mercantilist pamphleteers like Edward Misselden understood as “the Law and nature of Commerce” predicated on an exchange of “Wares for Wares” drew a lot of criticism from the detractors of the Company. Such concerns only intensified between the years 1620 and 1630, when England was suffering from a trade depression. What made the East India Company’s offence more dire was the sheer volume of its trade. As

---

Misselden for instance bewailed, the Company had outstripped even its counterpart in the Levant, having “set on foot a very Mightie Trade, farre beyond any other Company of this Kingdome.”7

Within a mercantilist schema, the Company exchanging silver for pepper, muslin, and calicoes caused a hemorrhaging, a loss of economic life-blood. The result was often categorized through metaphors of humoral imbalance as “consumption.” This notion of consumption, as Jonathan Gil Harris argues, combined the dual meanings of depleted bullion and of “conspicuous consumption, whereby luxury commodities were purchased by a new kind of subject, the individual consumer, so that they may be both privately owned and publicly flaunted.”8 The bulk of East India Company imports, of course, fell under the category of luxuries, of the type that was seen as instrumental in constructing this new subjectivity. Apart from pepper, the Company also traded in muslin, calicoes, and a wide range of commodities such as gums and quicksilver, used for the making of cosmetics.9 Moreover, as Linda Levy Peck observes, the rise in conspicuous consumption during the seventeenth century following a slack in sumptuary laws generated a climate where increasingly women were able to exercise their role as consumers. “Despite the limitations of coverture,” Peck argues, “which, interpreted strictly, meant that women could not make contracts, . . . married women, who had no standing in common law, were allowed to buy increasing amount of luxury goods to support their husband’s and family’s status.”10 Romelio at the very beginning of the play evokes the factors’ wives as members of this growing group of female consumers. He declares that his carracks to the East Indies bring in so much wealth that even his “Factors’ wives / Weare Shaperoones of Velvet” (1.1.7–8). His boast signals a new economic and social order where subsequent to the relaxation of sumptuary laws by James I, profit generated from global traffic could be publicly

7 Misselden, Free Trade, 78.
8 Harris, Sick Economies, 167.
flaunted through material objects such as textiles, pewter, and glass-ware. As late as 1566 “No man under the degree of a knight or of a lord’s room” could “wear any hat or upper cap of velvet... on pain to forfeit ten shillings.” Instead, the wives of Romelio’s East Indies factors reach above their station with impunity, becoming both emblems and partakers of a changing consumer culture. We might, therefore, begin to see how from the onset women figured as significant players in the emergent global commerce of the seventeenth century. Although Jolenta does not join in the conspicuous consumption in the play, she is, nonetheless, called upon to support her brother’s status, a status that is built up by the luxury imports from the east. In the play she rarely ventures outside the domestic space and might have otherwise come to embody model femininity unsullied by miscegenation or even by conspicuous consumption in contrast to the factors’ wives. Yet despite her virtuous nature she cannot remain unaffected by the East Indies trade, and has to emerge in public, with her face painted.

At the beginning of the play when Prospero, a fellow Neapolitan, marvels at Romelio’s “Spring-tide of Gold”; he answers, “Faith, and of Silver, / Should I not send it packing to th’East Indies, / We should have a glut on’t” (1.1.28–29). This boast touches upon one of the most common charges against the East India Company, namely the export of bullion. In his arrogance Romelio describes this efflux of silver as a way to regulate the circulation of money; by purging an excess of specie he is in effect preventing a “glut.” His estimation flies in the face of mercantilist treatises by Misselden and Malynes who, as we have seen, equated bullion with a nation’s wealth. Even an unwavering supporter of the East India Company like Thomas Mun did not dispute the necessity of silver in determining economic wellbeing:

[I]n those Kingdomes, which with great care and wariness doe euer vent out more of their home Commodities, than they import and use of foreign wares; for so undoubtedly the remainder must returne to them in treasure. But where a contrary course is taken, through wantonnesse and riot, to ouer-

\[11\] Ibid., 15.
waste both forren and domesticke wares, there must the money of necessity be exported, as the meanes to helpe to furnish such excesse, and so by the corruption of mens conditions and manners, many rich countries are made exceeding poore, whilst the people thereof, too much affecting their owne enormites, doe lay the fault in something else.13

Mun regards the reckless export of money as the prelude to a financial crisis. Romelio’s braggadocio, therefore, flouts the conventional wisdom of seventeenth-century mercantilist pamphleteers. Instead of recognizing silver as the nation’s lifeblood that must be preserved, he seems to advocate a regular purging in order to maintain a proper balance. His unconventional outlook on the state of the economy, moreover, goes hand in hand with his general contempt for aristocrats, which affects his decisions regarding his sister’s future. When Prospero attempts to praise Contarino, the nobleman who is deeply in love with Jolenta, he retorts: “What tell you me of Gentrie?—’tis nought else / But a superstitious relique of time past” (1.1.40–41).)

What Romelio seems to advocate for here is a new world order predicated on mercantile success, wherein aristocrats dependent on their land belong to a redundant, stationary system of wealth. Instead, with his ships sailing off to the Far East laden with bullion, the Neapolitan merchant embraces a more mobile model—one that takes advantage of what would have appeared to most English audiences as newly established trade routes and global traffic.

As the play progresses, however, Romelio’s faith in the surety of the East Indies trade appears misplaced. He loses his carracks (2.3.50), forcing him ironically enough to fall back upon his patrimony. Unlike Antonio in The Merchant of Venice, Romelio’s business ventures are not widely spread with argosies bound for Tripoli, Mexico, and England.14 Instead, he is known to his fellow citizens and in the court of law as “an East Indy Merchant” (4.2.88). What further distinguishes these two merchants who both have stakes in transnational trade is that Antonio’s rumored shipwrecks do not affect his family—in fact the Venetian merchant has no family, only a nobleman Bassanio as his close friend. The loss of Romelio’s

13 Thomas Mun, A Discourse of Trade (London, 1621), 2.
fortunes, on the other hand, directly impacts his immediate relatives—particularly his sister Jolenta. Desperate to rebuild his fortunes, he asks Jolenta to pretend that she is with child so that she can inherit the estates of Ercole, who is presumed dead. His devious scheme serves a dual purpose, for Romelio has impregnated a nun and hopes to pass off his own illegitimate offspring as his sister’s. Though outraged Jolenta decides to play along, and it is in the final court scene that she appears in the guise of a moor to plead her honesty. It is significant that it is the sister of an “East Indy Merchant” who must be blackened in public, but this is a transformation that had begun much earlier.

Contarino first describes his wooing of Jolenta in terms of a mercantile voyage of discovery, adventure, and profit:

\[
\begin{align*}
I \ & \ would \ not \ publish \ to \ the \ world, \\
& \ Nor \ have \ it \ whispered, \ scarce, \ what \ wealthy \ Voyage \\
& \ I \ went \ about, \ till \ I \ had \ got \ the \ Myne \\
& \ In \ mine \ own \ possession. \\
\end{align*}
\]

(1.1.95–98)

In this instance the nobleman assumes the role of a merchant much like Romelio, venturing out to seek his fortune. Reminiscent of mercantile colonialism, his “discovery” must be kept a secret until he is assured of his possession. If Jolenta’s eroticized body resembles a “myne,” then she must also provide Contarino with clear signs or tokens of his rights over her. This is a familiar rhetorical moment in early modern colonial expansion. As Stephen Greenblatt notes, beginning with Columbus’s “discovery” of the New World what legitimated European claims on foreign territories were the so called “voluntary” surrenders of sovereignty by the natives. The lack of armed resistance or even the giving of gifts could be re-imagined and re-categorized as symbols of submission. Contarino here evokes the Indies of mine and not of spice, but even in the east English merchants interpreted the gifting of nutmeg saplings as transfer of authority. For instance, in 1616, soon after the natives of the Banda Islands of Run and Ai gave them the closely guarded spice seedlings, the English factors assumed that the islanders had switched

---

their allegiance from the old Dutch rivals. Subsequently James I would style himself "King of England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Puloway (Pulo Ai) and Puloroon (Pulo Run)." In Contarino's amorous descriptions Jolenta assumes a position similar to that of a native who might yield herself and her natural riches to a merchant adventurer. At such moments, to use terminology drawn from Deleuze and Guattari, Jolenta seems to become-other, become-Moor. Becoming, as they suggest, does not imply being, a stability or fixity of identity. It does not depend upon filiation or evolution, but spreads through alliance and contagion (for our present purpose we might think of the cultural contagion of the racialized other). As Harris explains, while talking about European travelers “becoming-Indian” during the seventeenth century, the process of becoming “is related to but not quite the same as ‘going native’ or ‘turning Turk.’” Instead it implies “neither a cultural assimilation nor a religious conversion, each of which presumes the suppression of one identity by another.” Becoming consists of an assemblage, a hybridity. Becoming-Moor in the play gestures to this overlapping of identities. Anticipating her later appearance in blackface, Jolenta in her lover’s imagination already seems a palimpsest—both Neapolitan and a colonial subject, a white woman and an eroticized native.

Romelio similarly emphasizes his sister’s connection with global trade and colonial fantasy, particularly within the context of her marriage prospects. He tells Prospero that Contarino, with his waning aristocratic fortunes, “thinks if he can gaine my sisters love, / To recover the treble value” (1.1.46–47). This estimation comes shortly after his braggadocio concerning the stupendous returns from the

18 Deleuze and Guattari, Thousand Plateaus, 238, 241.
East Indies trade. It is fair to assume, therefore, that despite any initial patrimony, Jolenta’s dowry principally comes from the fortunes made in the east. In reality, English women associated with the East India Company frequently had stakes or shares in the cargo through their husbands, sons, and other male relatives. Adhering to customs prevalent since at least the Middle Ages, the Company reserved five per cent of cargo space on the ships for private trading.\(^2^0\) The extent of privilege onboard the Company ships varied, often resulting in “chronic conflict between Company and the crew over space.”\(^2^1\) In the absence of their husbands, however, the women could and did manage their share of eastern commodities. For instance, in 1615 Mary Brett petitioned the Company “for cloves delivered to Mr. Floris by her husband.”\(^2^2\) On April 19, 1614 the Court minutes recorded that the widowed Mrs. Ward would pay the freight for the goods sent to England by her late husband.\(^2^3\) In Webster’s play, while Jolenta does not get involved in handling the goods, her personal fortunes are nonetheless tied to the East Indies trade; and when her brother’s carracks flounder she is called upon to act.

Jolenta’s “transformation” into a Moor, her appearance in blackface, makes evident her intimate connection to the East Indies trade, and stages the manner by which she becomes-other. Unlike John Ward, for instance, in Daborne’s \textit{A Christian Turned Turk}, there is no moment of religious conversion; Jolenta does not turn apostate. Or does she? Her change touches upon moral, psycho-sexual, and physical stereotypes of what constituted a “Moor” in early modern imagination. To be called a Moor or to be “colour’d like that of a Moore” could mean a lot of different things. As Emily Bartels for instance observes, the term, “‘Moor’ is unstable and unreadable . . . because as a subject, ‘the Moor’ does not have a single or pure culturally or racially bound identity.”\(^2^4\) The “Moor” though usu-

\(^2^0\) Marcus Rediker, \textit{Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea} (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), 130.
\(^2^1\) Ibid., 132.
\(^2^3\) Ibid., 291.
ally seen as black, could also be tawny or even white. Moreover, the term was frequently used to describe followers of Islam, and the “Moor” might be found in North Africa, the Middle East, and even in India. For instance, Ralph Fitch, one of the earliest English travelers to the East Indies (1583–91), found Moors all across Asia. At Ormuz, or Hormuz, the seaport in the Persian Gulf he reported seeing “Moores and Gentiles.” Later, in India, he described Agra, the capital of the Mughal Emperors: “It hath a faire castle and a strong, with a very faire ditch. Here bee many Moores and Gentiles. The king is called Zelabdim Echebar [Jalaluddin Akbar]; the people for the most part call him the Great Mogor.” In Fitch, the “Moores” remain tied to their religious affiliation, a group distinct from the “Gentiles” which would have included not only Hindus, but also Jains and Buddhists. Such identification of the Moor with Islam though common was not inevitable, and later baptismal records continued to identify converts as “Moores.”

The Devil’s Law-Case, however, specifically draws attention to the change in Jolenta’s complexion—“Shee’s a blacke one indeed” (5.5.40). During the early modern period blackness was, of course, often seen as a physical manifestation of moral insufficiency, even lechery; and as the result of a curse stemming from Ham’s transgression, passed down through “infected” seed. It was the figure of the Moor, but particularly the Blackamoor that came to best exemplify this association between outward and inner complexion. For instance A Choice of Emblemes (1586) by Geoffrey Whitney urges readers to “Leave off with pain the blackamoor to scour / With Washing oft and wipping more than due” as a caution against unreasonable ventures.

27 Ibid., 17.
28 Habib, Black Lives, 50, 100.
Though prompted by Aesop’s fables, Whitney’s warning also resonates with the Geneva Bible (1560), which stated, “Can the black Moor change his skin? Or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good that are accustomed to do evil.” Blackness in this instance comes to signify innate evil, a moral flaw that has somatic as well as proto-racial undertones. The Bishop’s Bible (1568) returned to this conflation, substituting the blackamoor with the Indian: “May a man of Inde change his skin, and the cat of the mountain her spots? So may ye that be exercised in evil do good?”\textsuperscript{31} The Indian and the Moor seem similarly interchangeable in other versions of Aesop in sixteenth-century emblem books. Thomas Palmer’s \textit{Two Hundred Posseees} (1566) describes under “Impossible Things”:

\begin{quote}
Why washest thou the man of Inde?
Why taketh thou such pain?
Black night thou mayest soon make bright

\ldots

Indurate heart of heretics
Much blacker than the mole;
With word or writ who seeks to purge,
Stark dead he blows the coal\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

If the Moor can be found in India, then all Indians seem ready substitutes for Moors, specifically Blackamoors, sharing similar skin color and religious alterity (Islamic or otherwise). In Webster’s play, therefore, when Jolenta becomes-Moor, we can also see her becoming-Indian. At the same time this ability to become-Moor/Indian suggests the transformative influence of the exotic other, particularly at a time when the Levant and East India Companies made it increasingly possible for English households to own and display “Moorish” products from rugs, to textiles, to the cosmetics that would have been used by Jolenta to paint her face black.

In Webster’s play Jolenta’s black face alludes to her apparent pregnancy, her metaphorical blackness transferring onto the veiled pregnant nun who accompanies her on stage, and to her brother. She hints to her brother’s misdeeds—his sexual excesses as well as his (misplaced) vanity as an East Indy merchant. His recklessness

\textsuperscript{31} Qtd. in ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{32} Qtd. in ibid., 99.
in business mirrors his sexual incontinence. In her speech Jolenta attempts to recover her own whiteness, urging her beholders that

I onely care,
To preserve my Soule most faire.
Never mind the outward skin,
But the Jewll that’s within.

(V.v.41–48)

Her speech aligns her with the other “black” ladies of seventeenth-century court masques, civic pageantries, and plays; the darkness of skin gesturing toward an inevitable moment of conversion, a turn that might happen through a physical whitening as in Jonson’s Masque of Blackness or through the religious conversions in Lord Mayor’s shows. This promised restoration gestures towards the fact that Jolenta is after all still untarnished, her virginity still intact. Her blackness is simply a temporary coloring, a cosmetic application. Yet the play refuses to offer any easy resolution or restitution. Instead of the usual comedic conclusion, Contarino and Romelio are sent off to fight the Turks, while Jolenta, still unmarried, is ordered to build a monastery. Despite her inner whiteness, by coloring herself, the “East Indy” merchant’s sister seems to have permanently damaged her reputation.

In blackening her face Jolenta joins the ranks of other painted ladies in seventeenth-century Europe, women who put on cosmetics to alter their appearance. Although she is not using cosmetics to make herself fairer, her intention is still to hide her true skin. As Tanya Pollard and Farah Karim Cooper document, the painting of faces suggested prostitution (the paint covering up the marks of venereal disease) and raised “concerns about the contamination of national and class identity.”33 In fact, as Kimberly Poitevin notes, the ingredients for making cosmetics “came into England from nearly every corner of world,” including the East Indies, and one of the primary objections to English ladies painting their faces (either white or black) was that they were adopting and marking their skin

---

33 Tanya Pollard, Drugs and Theater in Early Modern England (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 88. See also Farah Karim Cooper, Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2006), 44.
with foreign fashion. Lignum aloes, for instance, came from Cochin; coral, Benjamin, civet, and musk also came from the East Indies.\footnote{Poitevin, “Inventing Whiteness,” 76.} In choosing to color her skin, Jolenta, much like the other painted ladies threatens to become something else, incorporating a dangerous exoticism.

In the course of the play Jolenta’s body comes to function as a site for staging the effects of global commerce, particularly the East Indies trade. Blackface, often understood in terms of moral and sexual degeneracy associated with the exotic “other,” seems to evoke the material and spiritual dangers of trading with the east. Romelio’s reckless indifference in squandering silver results in his sister having to feign being an unwed mother, her painted face at once illuminating and hiding the true state of things. Nonetheless, Jolenta’s transformation gestures towards a broader shift, one affecting other women in seventeenth-century England. European women who lived at home and never ventured abroad were as much participants in England’s trade expansion as their male counterparts who sailed off to the farthest corners of the globe. Like these men their bodies too came to be marked by signs of the “other”; they too became transculturated, became-Moor, and became-Indian.

\textit{Oklahoma City University}