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Black Skin, White Masks: *Izzat* as an appropriation of *Othello*

Izzat (Family Honour, 1968) was the first mainstream Hindi film to reference *Othello* and has so far escaped the attention of academics who have begun researching the under-explored field of Bollywood Shakespeares. The film stars Dharmendra playing both versions of a fair and a dark hued twin which is a novel take on a Shakespearean trope as well as an appropriation of Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*. As a mainstream film, *Izzat* does not aspire to the pedagogical cultural capital of Shakespeare that better known Indian cinematic appropriations of *Othello* such as *Saptapadi* (1961), *Kaliyattam* (1997), *In Othello* (2003) or *Omkara* (2006) do, nor does it reference the performance traditions of *Othello* on stage or film in India or abroad. However, references to Shakespeare's play, which seem superficial at first glance, are embedded throughout the film. Through this paper, I will explore the ways in which Shakespearean tropes and, Shakespeare's *Othello*, has been used to explore postcolonial anxieties about identity in India. I will also explore *Izzat*'s suggestion that the colonisers have been replaced in Indian society by the urban elite who value superficial white masks and practice a racism that is much more insidious by discriminating against other Indians based on colour, caste and class. Through this exploration, I will also examine how *Othello* impacts the Indian psyche and why the referencing of *Othello* in this film points towards the many ways in which *Othello* is adapted and appropriated in Indian mainstream media to this day.

In the 1940s, the typical Bollywood villain was the Zamindar, Jagirdar or Thakur and in the following two decades it was the capitalist, the industrialist, the rich man. The Zamindari system was formally introduced by Lord Cornwallis in Bengal in 1793 but the system existed even before the Mughal era.¹ *Zamindars* were aristocrats or royalty who owned land and collected taxes from the peasants; the system was similar to the feudal system in the middle ages in England. It was abolished in India after independence, but peasants were still economically dependent on noblemen and aristocrats due to the disparity of wealth between the noblemen and the peasants in postcolonial India. In *Izzat* for example, the Thakur is depicted as being in trade;

¹ TR Jain and others, *Indian Economy* (FK Publications, 2013), p 123

he owns the sawmill which employs most of the *adivasi* villagers in the area. His status, however, also allows him to take advantage of the villagers as is shown in his rape of Sawli (which translates to dark-skinned), Shekhar's *Adivasi* mother, and this is shown as symbolic of an exploitation of the *Adivasis* that has been happening for generations. This indirectly references the oppression of the 'natives' by the colonisers, by the foreign Mughals before that, and the Aryans before them. It is equally significant that in all these instances of history, the oppressors were fair of skin as compared to the natives. By locating the *Othello* text within this context, the obvious marginalization of the backward classes in India has been highlighted as a social problem within the film. The Thakur's servants are also *adivasis*, and only the wealthy are fair in this film.

India's Shakespeare

Sir Francis Younghusband, chiefly remembered for his role in the British invasion of Tibet in 1903, ranks *Othello* the most popular play in India: there is a larger number of translations of this play in India than any other. 'Othello is an Oriental figure; he is heroic, and he is a lover. Hence the popularity of the play among Indians.'² '*Othello* has consistently been among the most popular of Shakespeare plays in India for students and audiences since the nineteenth century: 'More students probably read *Othello* in the University of Delhi every year than in all British Universities combined', Ania Loomba had written at the end of the 1980s.³ This phenomenon is, of course, a legacy of the British Raj. After a series of military encounters had established British dominion over India by the early 1800s, the English sought to consolidate their political control by taking the responsibility to improve the social, religious, moral, economic and personal lot of its Indian subjects through modern, Western education.⁴ Lord

² Hedley Sutton and Karen Waddel, *Shakespeare in India*, Untold Lives Blog, (2016) <<http://blogs.bl.uk/untoldlives/2016/05/shakespeare-in-india.html>> [accessed 1 May, 2017]

³ Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester University Press, 1989)

⁴ Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (Columbia University Press, 2014). For brevity, I am glossing over the Charter Act of 1813 by which a sum of one lakh (one hundred thousand) rupees was allocated towards education in India by the British rulers and the Orientalist-Anglicist debate which resulted in the Macaulay Minute and the victory of the Anglicists in matters of Indian education. An excellent source for more information on this subject is Lynn Zastoupil and Martin Moir, *The Great Indian Education Debate: Documents Relating to the Orientalist-Anglicist Controversy, 1781-1843* (Psychology Press, 1999)

Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education in 1835 underlined the practical need for 'a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect' to act as intermediaries between the British rulers and the masses they ruled.⁵ This was achieved by the passing of the English Education Act in 1835 which called for English to be the official language of study and instruction in India leading to the establishment of schools and colleges which imparted Western education in the English medium to students from Indian Royalty and gentry. By introducing English literature and allowing access to Calcutta theatres to elite Indians, the consent of the governed was thus secured through intellectual and moral manipulation rather than through military force.⁶ When Lord Hardinge's resolution of 1844 assured preference in selection for government positions to Indians who had distinguished themselves in European literature, it led to a growing middle class who sought to master English literature and language not just for social mobility but also for professional gain; as Geoffrey Kendal writes, 'At one time English plays meant everything. Unless you could quote Shakespeare, you would not get a job'.⁷

In eighteenth-century England, Shakespeare had become increasingly popular due to David Garrick's efforts and was seen by many of the British colonisers 'as a supreme achievement of the race, as a measure of England's general world-wide superiority, and as an emblem of that English heritage whose propagation could properly be regarded as part of the white man's civilising burden'.⁸ Though, as Ania Loomba points out, Shakespeare (and English Literature) was frequently regarded as beyond the comprehension of the lower orders, it was also considered necessary for their schooling.⁹ This is seen frequently in the works of educators at the time: for example, in the works and teachings of William Miller (1838-1923) who taught Shakespeare to college students in South India and used it as a moral yardstick for the reformation of the 'native character' as can be gleaned from the title of his book *Shakespeare's*

⁵ Thomas B. Macaulay, 'Minute on Indian Education', *Archives of Empire*, 1 (2003), pp 227-238

⁶ Jyotsna Singh, 'Shakespeare and the 'Civilizing Mission'', *Colonial Narratives/Cultural Dialogues: 'Discoveries' of India in the Language of Colonialism*, (1996), p 123

⁷ Geoffrey Kendal and Clare Colvin, *The Shakespeare Wallah: The Autobiography of Geoffrey Kendal* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1986) p 161. Being educated in the English medium and having a background in English literature is still an important part of the social and professional lives of Indians.

⁸ Harish Trivedi, 'Shakespeare in India: Colonial Contexts', in *Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1993, 1995), p 13.

⁹ Ania Loomba, 'Shakespearean Transformations', *Shakespeare and National Culture*, (1997), p 113.

Chart of Life (1905).¹⁰ Thus, we are given an insight into Shekhar's intellectual character in the opening sequence of *Izzat* where he exhorts his protesting peers to remember their education, uphold the values of their culture, and make their demands in a peaceful manner. We are then informed that his mother has made great sacrifices to educate Shekhar at a missionary institution which should put him at par with his socially superior father who has rejected his mother for being an *Adivasi* [tribal].

Britain's rising interest in biographical, historical and psychological studies of Shakespeare's plays also found expression in the Indian curriculum in the eighteenth-century: Rangana Banerji asserts that in the early stages of canon formation, it was the textbooks written or selected by the English teachers in India, such as D. L. Richardson and Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, and their teaching methods which stressed close reading of the text, as well as the importance of understanding the texts as plays in performance that has led to an in-depth study of Shakespeare among students of Indian literature that is continued till today.¹¹ Students were tested on their knowledge of Shakespearean sources, evidence for dating the play, on characterisation and comprehension, as well as their ability to recite passages from the prescribed text.¹² Shakespeare was moreover used to study grammar, prosody, intonation and pronunciation: 'students were supposed to learn about prepositions, the past perfect tense, and the niceties of modern English usage by devoting their nights and days to *Othello* or *The Merchant of Venice*', consequently ensuring a mastery over Shakespeare by generations of Indian students even when they were not scholars of English Literature.¹³ This cultural phenomenon is depicted in the scene in *Izzat* where Deepa meets Shekhar for the first time and discuss whether the tragedy was the fault of Othello or of Desdemona which I will discuss in more detail below.

Racial Stratification based on Colour

¹⁰ Trivedi, p 14.

¹¹ Rangana Banerji, "Every College Student Knows by Heart": The Uses of Shakespeare in Colonial Bengal', in *The Shakespearean International Yearbook: Volume 12: Special Section, Shakespeare in India.*, ed. by Graham Bradshaw and others (Ashgate, 2012), p 30. Banerji's essay is a detailed study of the importance of Shakespeare in the pedagogic practices and social impact of Shakespeare studies in India.

¹² Ibid, p 32.

¹³ Trivedi, p 23.

Colourism is deeply ingrained in Indians right from childhood. Illustrated children's books, televised cartoons based on mythology, and calendar art that is present in most Indian homes, depict demons who are brown, and gods who are pink or blue. So, Indra, Brahma and Durga are pink, Asuras and Rakshasas are brown, and Vishnu, Ram, Kali and Krishna are blue. When children question the unnatural hue of the blue gods, we are told that "blue is the color of the sky, of ether, of divinity".¹⁴ Yet, Krishna, also known as Shyam, are both common synonyms for black, and Kali, from the Sanskrit *kāla*, also known as Shyama, means 'the black one'. If we investigate further, traditional Patta chitras in Orissa portrayed Krishna and Vishnu using black paint while Balarama and Shiva are always drawn white. Similarly, folk songs, and even Hindi film songs, constantly refer to Krishna's dark complexion. Thus, in the context of mythology, it may be presumed that black vs white does not mean evil vs good, but rather wildness, worldliness and non-conformity vs domesticity, otherworldliness and conformity, and these mythic codes have influenced our modern views about complexion and color prejudices in India. White suggests that the darkness of Kali is interpreted as her being Brahman in its supreme unmanifest state and concepts of color, light, good, bad do not apply to her.¹⁵ Devdutt Pattananik, noted Indian mythologist and writer, identifies her as the Goddess in her most primal form – 'dark, naked, ferocious, gaunt, aroused and bloodthirsty'.¹⁶ Her other avatar, however, is Gauri, the radiant one, the auspicious one, the graceful one. Therefore, according to Pattananik, 'black and white become symbols of wildness and domestication in the context of the Goddess'. Similarly, Krishna, dressed in silks and gold and pearls and anointed with sandal paste, embracing all the colors of life, is black. Pattananik compares him to a prism absorbing all the colours of the light spectrum. By this analogy, Shiva, the still, serene ascetic, dressed in animal hides and smeared in ash, living on icy mountaintops away from civilization absorbs none of the colours of the world and is therefore white. While Hindus equally worshiped both aspects of the gods, over time and due to the civilising mission of the British Raj and of missionaries in India, the moral of the stories changed to demonstrate that wildness and non-conformity is dangerous while domestication and conformity is to be celebrated.

¹⁴ Devdutt Pattanaik, *Black Gods and White Gods; Indian Mythology*, <https://devdutt.com/articles/black-gods-and-white-gods/> edn, 25 January 2019 vols (27 July, 2009) [accessed 25 January 2019]

¹⁵ David G. White, *Tantra in Practice*, 8 vols (Princeton University Press, 2000)

¹⁶ Pattanaik, *Black Gods and White Gods; Indian Mythology*

Correspondingly, Michael Neill, in his illuminating essay, "' Mulattos,'" Blacks," and " Indian Moors": Othello and Early Modern Constructions of Human Difference', proposes that in 'Roderigo's perspective, to be a "Moor of Venice" is to represent a principle of wild disorder lodged in the very heart of metropolitan civilization - to be, in Iago's words, a kind of "civil monster".'¹⁷ Othello's Africa is not only the place that validates his birth "from men of royal siege" (1.2.22) but also a wilderness of Plinian monstrosities, of "Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders" (1.3.145-46). One way of describing the action of his tragedy, according to Neill, is in terms of the process by which Iago gradually prises open the contradictions in an oxymoronic subtitle that marks the uneasy translation of "erring Barbarian" into "civil monster" (1.3.356; 4.1.64) - the process by which he successfully essentializes or "racializes" Othello's difference, which parallels the action in *Omkara*.¹⁸ In this same essay, Neill further indicates how colourism began to be the primary form of Othering in Europe once Europeans began to explore and encounter foreign cultures. In previous times, the English sought to Other the Irish, a people physically similar to the English, but different because of their cultural differences, by labelling them barbarous or uncivilised. 'In the later sixteenth century, however, the rapid expansion of national horizons through exploration and trade increasingly faced the English with foreign cultures whose sophisticated ways of life resisted assimilation into the cultural categories by which the threat of alterity had traditionally been contained.'¹⁹ This was of course, not exclusively an English problem, but one faced by other European travelers and traders of the time and a study of texts written in that period point to colour emerging as the most important criterion for defining Otherness. The Dutch traveler Van Linschoten, for instance, resorts to listing the differences between the various Asian peoples he encountered by describing their shades of skin tone:

The people of Ormuz are "white like the Persians," those of Bengal "somewhat whiter then the Chingalas" ;"The people of Aracan, Pegu, and Sian are . . . much like those of China, onely one difference they haue, which is, that they are somewhat whiter then the Bengalon, and somewhat browner then the men of China"; in China itself, "Those that dwell on the Sea side ... are a people of a brownish colour, like the white Moores in Africa and Barbaria, and part of the Spaniards, but those that dwell within the land, arefor color like Jfetherlanders & high Dutches." Yet "[t]here are many among them that are

¹⁷ Michael Neill, "' Mulattos,'" Blacks," and " Indian Moors": Othello and Early Modern Constructions of Human Difference', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 49 (1998), p 4

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p 3

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p 7

deane blacke" while "[i]n the lande lying westward from China, they say there are white people, and the land called Cathaia, where (as it is thought) are many Christians."²⁰

Neill further underlines the implications of skin colour that were developing around the time which find reflection in how Indians read skin colour till today – the association of whiteness with virtue. Thus, Princess Quisara in Fletcher's *The Island Princess* (1621) is described virtuous because of her whiteness: "The very Sun I thinke, affects her sweetnesse, / And dares not as he does to all else, dye it / Into his tauny Livery" (1.1.60-62).²¹ The princess's whiteness, therefore, is the sign of inward 'sweetnesse' that will be expressed in her conversion to Christianity when she is engaged to the Portuguese hero Armusia at the end of the play. At the same time the play associates 'East Indian tawinness' with a kind of servile 'Livery', which, according to Neill, 'resonates dangerously with those contemporary discourses that interpreted dark skin (in both African and West Indian contexts) as a sign of natural servitude'.²² Interestingly, *Izzat* is dominated with images of Christianity as much as Indian religious and social icons such as Hindu gods and Indian freedom fighters. Father Ibrahim is one of the central characters in the first part of the film – he is emblematic of the white man's education and civilization imparted to the tribals such as Shekhar and Mahesh; he also prevents Shekhar's mother from committing suicide.²³

In India, there is a pervasive association of fairness with virtue. 'Her name, that was as fresh/ As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black/ As mine own face' says Othello in 3.3; Indians use the term '*muh kala karna*' [to blacken one's face] as a reference to lost virtue. The association of fairness with virtue can easily be identified in India by a quick perusal through the matrimonial advertisements in any paper, which stress on fairness as a requirement for prospective brides. Wolf states that women in the bourgeois marriage markets of the last century learned to understand their own beauty as part of the economy.²⁴ Johnson, however, observes that the Indian matrimonial market employs phrases such as 'wheatish' and 'dusky' to refer to

²⁰ Ibid, p 8

²¹ John Fletcher, *The Island Princess in The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, ed. Fredson Bowers, 10 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1966-96), 5:539-642.

²² Neill, "' Mulattos,'" " Blacks," and " Indian Moors": Othello and Early Modern Constructions of Human Difference', p 9

²³ There is an entire five minute song sequence 28 minutes into the film where Mahesh preaches Father Ibrahim's teachings such as sharing the burdens and joys of family and friends, not falling prey to jealousy, being kind of animals, and being truthful at all times despite the personal cost

²⁴ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are used Against Women* (Random House, 1991). P 9

various gradations in skin tone, with the lightest tones being considered the most desirable in addition to the usual descriptive characteristics found in personal ads in other countries.²⁵ The consumer market in India is another indicator, with the overabundance of ‘fairness creams’ for men and women by different national and international companies. Skin lighteners are bought not only by the middle and upper classes, but also by rural and urban women and men from lower-income households. ‘It is this reality that exposes the tenacity of the fairness phenomenon as a means of acquiring social capital, particularly in terms of marriageability.’²⁶ Social and family customs are further proof: pregnant mothers are traditionally bathed in milk, turmeric and saffron to ensure the birth of fair children, to cite but one example.²⁷ Milk, turmeric and saffron are applied externally in order to lighten the skin as traditional beauty practices; they are also applied during weddings and religious ceremonies to both men and women as part of purification rituals, thereby further conflating notions of fairness with virtue and purity in the minds of Indians.

In the sixteenth century, there was an impulse by European traders and colonisers to categorise racial distinctions on the one hand, and to see all shades as one when placed alongside ‘whiteness’. The association of tawny skin with servitude by Europeans would also play out in the nineteenth century race theories during the British Raj; on one hand, they would depict Asians as closer to Europeans because of their cranial shape and facial features, but on the other hand, inferior because their colour was closer to the ‘Negroes’ on the scale. It is however, in the eighteenth century, with the advent of the pseudo-science of craniology, that the stratification of races according to physical characteristics and colour began to take a firmer hold. In fact, India became a crucial testing ground for theories of race, partly because the caste system was thought to have prevented intermixing.²⁸ The eighteenth century Dutch scientist Petrus Camper (1722-89) categorised people based on ‘the natural difference of features of different persons of

²⁵ Sonali E. Johnson, 'The Pot Calling the Kettle Black? Gender-Specific Health Dimensions of Colour Prejudice in India', *Journal of Health Management*, 4 (2002), p 2

²⁶ Ibid, p 5

²⁷ Lydia Durairaj, *Colour Prejudice has Deeper Meanings and Unwarranted Consequences*, <http://www.theweekendleader.com/Causes/1098/be-yourself.html>, (20 February, 2015) [accessed 23 February, 2015]

²⁸ Carol Upadhyaya. ‘The Hindu Nationalist Sociology of G. S. Ghurye.’ National Workshop on Knowledge, Institutions, Practices: The Formation of Indian Anthropology and Sociology, 2000, unipune.ac.in/snc/cssh/HistorySociology/A%20DOCUMENTS%20ON%20HISTORY%20OF%20SOCIOLOGY%20IN%20INDIA/A%203%20IEG%20Workshop%20papers%202000/A%203%2005.pdf . [Accessed Mar.7, 2015], p 13

different countries and periods of life, and on beauty as exhibited in ancient sculpture' using a new method of sketching heads.²⁹ In 1821, the *Calcutta Journal* reproduced a report and a diagram published by the *Liverpool Mercury*, which presented a study of the shape of human skulls among various races of the world, based on the *Works* of Camper.³⁰ The categorization from Monkey to Grecian Antique (Figure 1) placed Asians at a remove from the Negro, the American Savage and the monkey but also at a remove from the European who, while at some distance away from the Greco-Roman, used this distance to confer 'normalcy' on their own features. Consequently, this notion of a classification of races was particularly useful for the British in maintaining their dominance over their colonized subjects in India by encouraging Asians to see themselves as being closer to the normative, 'superior' European man than the supposedly 'inferior' Africans.

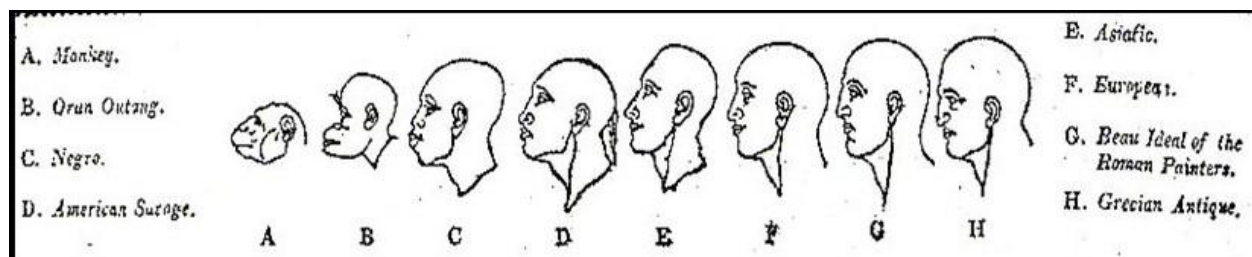


Figure 1: Physiognomy and the facial line, Calcutta Journal 1821.

Though this theory was not monolithically accepted by all Englishmen in India, it did allow, eventually, for an Indian youth, 'a real unpainted nigger Othello', to play Othello at the Sans Souci in 1848 under the auspices of Indian and British patronage; this was seen as 'different and less of a fall from "civilization" than having an African play the part'.³¹ The racial identification between the actor and the role had a certain outrage value, but not at par with the shock and indignation generated by mixed-cast productions of Othello in the west.³² In fact,

²⁹ Petrus Camper, *The Works of the Late Professor Camper, on the Connexion between the Science of Anatomy, and the Art of Drawing, Painting, Statuary, &c., &c* (1794)

³⁰ Sudipto Chatterjee and Jyotsna G. Singh, 'Moor Or Less? the Surveillance of Othello, Calcutta 1848', in *Shakespeare and Appropriation* (Routledge, 2013), p 72

³¹ Kironmoy Raha, *Bengali Theatre* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, India, 1978), p 13

³² Dymna Callaghan mentions nineteenth century American performances where white actresses were cast opposite black actors which generated distress to the white community who did not want 'their' women to be 'pawed' by black men. See Dymna Callaghan, 'Othello was a White Man': Properties of Race on Shakespeare's Stage', *Alternative Shakespeares*, 2 (1996), pp 192-215

Indian actors were commended for their efforts in participating in the ‘superior’ culture of their colonial masters. Praising Audhya’s heroic attempts, for instance, the *Bengal Hurkura* said:

Othello was the great attraction on Thursday night...the player however and not the play. Performed by Baboo Bustom Churn Addy...all expectations were of course centered in the young aspirant for dramatic fame, who has gallantly flung down his gauntlet to the rest of the members of the native community.³³

Remarkably, as pointed out by Chatterjee and Singh, the Indian subjects identified more readily with the Europeans than the black character, and Othello’s alienation and otherness was not seen as providing a parallel to the situation of the Indian colonised subject.

The caste system in India further complements the idea of fairness being equivalent to good breeding and social superiority. The Aryans, an allegedly homogenous group who conquered the Indian subcontinent in the first millennium B.C., are said to have introduced the caste system in India based on the concept of *varna* [colour]. Since ‘Arya’ means ‘Noble’ in Sanskrit, this inevitably gave rise to the belief that lighter skin meant higher birth and thus, prosperity. In *Izzat* (1968) when Deepa’s father comments on the unusual darkness of Shekhar’s skin, her mother chooses to deliberately ignore his skin colour and says: ‘*Aamir aadmi ke beetein kabhi kaalen hotein hain kya?*’ [Can the sons of rich people ever be dark?]. Later, when she invites Shekhar to wash his face and hands after his journey, he remarks that doing so will not change his colour, to which she responds that to them he ‘appears white’ because of who he is. Deepa’s father underlines this sentiment by cheerfully remarking that he looks ‘*bilkul English*’ [absolutely English] Although there is considerable historical debate as to the accuracy of the idea of an Aryan ‘race’, including uncertainty as to their exact geographical origins, the ‘Aryan myth’, has endured in India mostly due to the nineteenth-century race theories which traced the origin of both Hindus and Europeans to a common Aryan stock.³⁴ Indians frequently attribute their lighter complexions to their supposed Aryan heritage in Northern India and it is commonly held that it is the Dravidian ‘natives’ in southern India who are typically dark-skinned. Historically, thus, one’s caste or social class is closely identified with skin colour because

³³ Bengal Hurkura, 19 August 1848. Quoted in Paromita Chakravarti, 'Modernity, Postcoloniality and Othello: The Case of Saptapadi', *Remaking Shakespeare: Performance Across Media, Genres, and Cultures*, (2003), p 46

³⁴ Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, 3 vols (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 66-92, Peter Robb, *The Concept of Race in South Asia* (Oxford University Press, 1995) 165-218; 282-303

Brahmins, at the top of the social hierarchy in the caste system, were traditionally fair, while lower castes had darker complexions. Subsequently, the association of darker skin tones with people of lower caste and class further complicated colour prejudice in Northern India.

Traditionally backward classes such as the *adivasis*, *dalits* and other scheduled castes and tribes (SCs and STs) are dark skinned and, as a result, there is an automatic assumption of social and financial backwardness with Indians of darker skin colour.³⁵

Izzat and the colour of prejudice

Like other films of its time, such as *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953) and *Nishant* (1975), *Izzat* chooses to focus on the marginalization and exploitation of the *adivasis* [tribal people] by the rich *zamindars* [landlords] and, notably, uses *Othello* to comment on the othering prevalent in postcolonial India based on colour, caste and class. The male protagonist of the film, the tribal and, therefore, dark skinned Shekhar finds out that his mother had been raped and abandoned by his *zamindar* father and decides to seek revenge. In a peculiar mimicry of British actors playing *Othello*, the fair skinned Dharmendra (the actor playing Shekhar and Dilip) here blackens his face to portray his *adivasi* role, thereby effectively replacing the coloniser rather than mimicking him.³⁶ Shekhar travels to his father's house seeking revenge only to discover that he has a half-brother who looks exactly like him except for the colour of his skin, as well as a half-sister.³⁷ Confronted with a Hamletian dilemma, he decides that instead of killing his father, he would help his half-brother Dilip marry his *Adivasi* sweetheart and shatter his father's pride in his bloodline. In the course of switching places with his brother, he meets the fair Deepa and tries to convince her that marrying him would result in a repetition of the tragedy of *Othello*. Fortunately, Deepa chooses to look beyond his insecurities and the film ends with two inter-

³⁵ For a more detailed examination of the social inequalities faced by *Dalits* and *Adivasis* and affirmative action undertaken by the postcolonial Indian government to uplift their position, read Chad M. Bauman, 'Identity, Conversion, and Violence: Dalits, Adivasis, and the 2007-08 Riots in Orissa', (2010) and Sonalde Desai, and Veena Kulkarni, 'Changing Educational Inequalities in India in the Context of Affirmative Action', *Demography*, 45 (2008), 245-270.

³⁶ In one scene, Dilip uses ash from the fireplace to physically darken his appearance to pretend to be Shekhar

³⁷ The difference in colour, though remarked on several times in the film, are hardly distinguishable.

racial marriages and with the *zamindar* finally choosing his abandoned *Adivasi* son over his *izzat*.



Figure 2: Still from Rao, *Izzat* (57:28). Dilip (left) convincing Shekhar (right) to take his place.

While most stage and film interpretations of *Othello* choose to gloss over the racial issues that lie at the heart of *Othello*, *Izzat* uses these issues to highlight the exploitation of the backward classes by the rich landed gentry. These issues in the play are appropriated deftly for the purposes of this film: for instance, when Shekhar is mistaken for Dilip and is asked to sing at his sister's birthday party, he sings of people who hide behind masks, '*Kya miliye aise logon se jinke fitrat chupi rahe, nakli chehra saamne aaye, asli chehra chhupi rahe*' [How does one interact with people whose real natures are hidden, their real faces lie hidden behind pretty masks]. The lyrics of this song seem to echo two sentiments from the play. The first sentiment is the deceit that may lie behind a fair face that Brabantio refers to when he warns Othello: 'Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: She has deceived her father, and may thee' (1.3.293).³⁸ The second, and related, reference is to the natural association of fairness with virtue that is prevalent in many cultures, as when the Duke says: 'If virtue no delighted beauty lack/ Your son-in-law is far more fair than black' (1.3.290). G. K. Hunter refers to the Elizabethans' long held belief that 'black is the colour of sin and death'. He goes on further to add that 'This supposition

³⁸ All quotations from the text are from William Shakespeare, E.A.J., Honigmann, *Othello* (London: Thomson Learning, 1997).

is found all over the world (even in the darkest Africa) from the earliest to the latest times; and in the West there is a continuous and documented tradition of it'.³⁹ These references, in turn, highlight the complexity behind the othering based on colour prejudice that occurs in India, both among Indians and with foreigners of darker skin colour than Indians.⁴⁰ This sequence also underlines one of the concerns of Frantz Fanon's 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks*, where Fanon confronts complex formations of colonized psychic constructions of Blackness and applies psychoanalysis to explain the feelings of dependency and inadequacy that black people experience. He discusses how the colonised try to appropriate and imitate the culture of the colonizer by acquiring status symbols within the world of the colonial ecumene, such as an education abroad and mastery of the language of the colonizer to don white masks. Fanon's work contextualises the historical reality of the urban elite in post-independence India identifying with their colonial masters and continuing the legacy of oppression of the British colonisers in postcolonial India, which is a circumstance which continues till today.

Izzat also underlines another aspect of *Othello*; 'Dealing as it does with marriage and love, *Othello* has generic affinities with comedy or domestic drama rather than with heroic or classical tragedy', remarked Paromita Chakravarti.⁴¹ 'This could be one of the reasons why in Indian translations, adaptations, and critiques, the play is always treated as a text which articulates individual freedom and romantic love against patriarchal dictates and familial pressure.'⁴² In *Omkaara*, Omi/Othello gifts Dolly/Desdemona an ornate *kardhani* [waist ornament] in lieu of the handkerchief from the play and tells her that it is a family heirloom worn by generations of brides in his family: '*Hamare purkho ki izzat ka poonji hain yeh*'. The *kardhani* is, as Hogan explains, 'an ornament associated with eroticism and sexual desire in marriage'; however, it also a mark of ownership of the body of the wife and 'signifies the new roles of the bride as the daughter-in-law and future mistress of the home'.⁴³ When Shekhar in *Izzat*, asks Deepa who she thinks is responsible for the tragedy she immediately responds by

³⁹ George K. Hunter, *Othello and Colour Prejudice* (Oxford University Press, 1967), p 140

⁴⁰ Gautam Bhatia, *The Dark Side of Fairness: As India Shifts Towards Greater Equality, Old Prejudices about Skin Colour Persist*, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/indianews/article-2288675/The-dark-fairness-As-India-shifts-greater-equality-old-prejudices-skin-colour-persist.html>, (6 March, 2013) [accessed 14 February, 2015].

⁴¹ Paromita Chakravarti, 'Modernity, Postcoloniality and Othello: The Case of Saptapadi', *Remaking Shakespeare: Performance Across Media, Genres, and Cultures*, (2003), p 4

⁴² Ibid, p 4

⁴³ Lalita P. Hogan, 'The Sacred and the Profane in Omkaara: Vishal Bhardwaj's Hindi Adaptation of Othello', *Image & Narrative*, 11 (2010), p 59.

saying: ‘*Othello, jo apne rang ke ehsaas se kabhi na nikal saka, aur us kabse ke jasbe se jo mard hamesha aurat pe jatata hain.* [Othello, who never could come out from under the shadow of his own insecurities about his skin colour and from the sense of ownership that men inevitably claim over women]. This sequence foreshadows the one in *Omkara* when Omi playfully accuses Dolly of being either a fool or a witch for loving him. The exchange in this sequence in *Izzat* (and later in *Omkara*) sums up Othello’s own feelings of insecurity relating to the colour of his skin as demonstrated when he voices sentiments like: ‘For she had eyes and chose me’ (3.3.192), and later ‘Haply for I am black...’ (3.3. 267). In fact, *Izzat* underlines Shekhar’s insecurities about his skin colour repeatedly: when Dilip asks Shekhar to go meet Deepa in his stead, Shekhar asks, ‘So she can take one look at me and refuse to marry a dark man like me?’ and he repeatedly dares Deepa and her parents to reject him based on his colour. Ultimately, a happy ending is achieved when Dilip marries Chutki, and Deepa, who was betrothed to Dilip, falls in love with and marries Shekhar after declaring; ‘*Mard hamesha roop dekhta hain, aurat gun*’ [Men only see beauty, women see virtue]. Interestingly, almost in the manner of one of Shakespeare’s problem plays, while the happy ending in *Izzat* indicates that colour prejudice in Indian society will be eradicated with education, Deepa’s assertion that men treat women as possessions is brushed under the carpet and never referred to again. Thus, a mainstream Indian film in the 1960s which sparks off a conversation about appearances and colour prejudices that is quite alien to an industry which traditionally favours light skinned protagonists refuses to engage in gender politics as do many other adaptations and appropriations of *Othello* in India.

Othello is a play which ‘remains haunted by its own cultural history’; the racially and politically charged subtexts of the play find particular resonance in postcolonial India.⁴⁴ *Izzat* is a mainstream Bollywood film constructed using typical Bollywood tropes of revenge, long-lost brothers, forbidden love, social privilege, and a discussion of what it means to be educated and Indian. While it has escaped the academic attention that other, more extended engagements with the play, such as *Saptapadi*, *Omkara*, *Kaliyattam*, and *In Othello* have received in recent years, *Izzat* works within the mainstream Bollywood cultural concerns and makes a very important point about colourism and social privilege that the other adaptations do not engage with in any detail, focused as they are on questions of caste as a substitute for race. *Izzat*’s preoccupation with colourism is arguably closer to the discussions on race embedded within Shakespeare’s

⁴⁴ Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe, *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen* (Polity, 2007), p 123.

play. Consequently, *Izzat* is a valuable appropriation within the history of the evolution of *Othello* adaptations in India on stage and screen and deserves further scrutiny and discussion.

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