Remaking Shakespeare

Performance Across Media, Genres and Cultures

Edited by
Pascale Aebischer, Edward J. Esche and Nigel Wheale

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Modernity, Postcoloniality and *Othello*: the Case of *Saptapadi*

Paromita Chakravarti

Othello and the performance of race

The exploration of racial issues in *Othello* has made it a useful and enabling text for racially segregated cultures and more generally for colonial and postcolonial readers, adapters and performers of Shakespeare. Othello's character provides a mouthpiece for the consciousness of a denigrated people in the unequal and exploitative cultural encounter with Europe. But the Moor's status as the voice of a persecuted race remains debatable and deeply problematic. Critics argue that his high social standing in the white Venetian society and his indispensability to the Venetian government and militia largely cancel out the effects of race and colour and make him an exception rather than a typical representative of the oppressed black people.[1]

Whether we see Othello as articulating a black identity or seeking to mask it, whether we believe that Shakespeare was raising the spectre of racism only to erase it, whether we interpret the play as sustaining or questioning racial stereotypes, the polyvalence of the play remains undeniable. The amenability of the text to contrary responses presents interpreters and performers with a vast array of performative possibilities and opportunities. Its rich racial ambiguities can be mined in different ways depending on a particular interpretation or adaptation. The meaning of *Othello*, perhaps more so than other Shakespearean plays, depends on performance, the politics of performance and the politics surrounding performance. We must remember that race, as it is commonly constructed and understood in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is predominantly a physically inscribed category inseparable from the material reality of actors' bodies. Factors such as the racial identities of the actors, whether or not Othello is played by a black actor, whether or

not Desdemona is white, the racial composition of the audience and where the play is being staged, assume immense importance in terms of our understanding not only of the text but of the cultures which deploy the text in specific ways.[2]

I propose to examine how a performance of *Othello* and the impact it has on the racial politics of a colonised nation is explored tellingly in a postcolonial cinematic negotiation of the play in a specific Indian, Bengali context. I look at an influential and popular Bengali film of the 1960s which is set in British India and uses a performance of *Othello* to question certain racial stereotypes.[3] The focus of interest in this discussion will not be the play and the insights that the performance brings to it but rather how it illuminates the context of playing. The way in which the text is used to construct racial identities and to legitimise interracial contact helps us understand the colonial and postcolonial situation in India and the status of Shakespeare in Indian cultural transactions with British imperialism. For this reason I will explore in some detail the socio-political context of Shakespearean studies, receptions and performances in British India to understand how the colonial legacy is negotiated in a later, postcolonial culture.

The film revolves around the implications and actual repercussions of a staging of the play with a young Bengali actor playing Othello opposite a white Desdemona in British colonial India. This revolutionary stage image of a white girl in the arms of an Indian man challenges both the entrenched notions of racial segregation of the colonialists as well as the Hindu orthodoxies of the traditional Bengalis who looked askance at mixed marriages. It thus becomes an icon of liberal, secular modernity. But this modernity is itself deeply problematic and needs to be located in the larger colonial project of using Shakespeare as a vehicle of disseminating 'modern' and 'civilised' values to a 'benighted' nation.

Shakespeare in colonial India: negotiating modernity

The introduction of Shakespeare to Indians as part of the modernising mission of the colonial government must be studied in the context of the great pedagogical debate of the 1830s between the traditionalists on the one hand, who favoured an Orientalist education for the natives and the Progressivists or modernisers on the other, who supported a western model of instruction.

The debate resulted in the passing of the Indian Education Act (1835) which promulgated that Indians would be educated in English rather than in the classical Indian languages such as Sanskrit, Persian or Arabic,

and traditional subjects would be replaced by western sciences and liberal arts. Thus the dissemination of English language and literature was formally acknowledged as the tool to be used by the colonial administration in creating a native élite educated in western ideas and values who would need to be co-opted if British rule was to be consolidated.[4] Thomas Macaulay's 'Minute on Indian Education' (1835) spells out the underlying intentions of this educational programme – to create 'a class of people Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect' who would serve as 'interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern'.[5]

The black-skinned, white-masked Fanonian colonial subject seems to be under construction here.[6] The study of English literature is adopted as a means of creating such a subject and Shakespeare proves to be a particularly potent tool in this project. The political need was to create a class of anglicised Indians who would help to perpetuate British rule.[7]

Apart from the more cynical reasons for introducing English studies among the natives, there was an altruistic motive of bringing the fruits of a more 'advanced' civilisation to an inferior one.[8] Among the highest achievements of this superior culture were the plays of Shakespeare. As the supreme exemplum of European humanist ideals, Shakespeare became equated with the best values that western civilisation had to offer to the Indians. In pedagogy and performance Shakespearean plays became a conduit for the diffusion of European Enlightenment ideals of reason, liberalism, humanism and progressivism which would become ammunition in the war against Hindu traditionalism, superstition, casteism and what were seen by many as essentially regressive tendencies in native life. As Jashodhara Bagchi points out, English literature in general, and Shakespeare in particular, became 'the *Mantra* for the New India in its fight against obscurantist traditionalism'.[9]

The use of the word 'mantra' is particularly apt because Shakespeare's works acquired a quasi-religious stature as an embodiment of the highest 'human' values. They provided a 'secular' space outside the fold of traditional religion and caste in which young native subjects could formulate their ideas about life. The plays provided them with a language in which they could articulate philosophical, metaphysical and ethical concerns outside the bounds of a Hindu framework. As Bagchi points out, English literature became a 'source of non-denominational spirituality, a harbinger of a secular outlet'.[10] But this space, as we know, was neither secular nor neutral: it was largely Christian and British, yet it had an important contribution in a colonised people's early encounters with modernity.

The ahistorical reading of Shakespeare as an exemplar of a transcendent humanism blinded students to the fact that Shakespeare is indeed *a* writer rather than *the* writer, and English literature is *a* literature of a dominant imperial power, not *the* literature. Universalist assumptions about 'human nature' which underlie colonial Shakespeare studies pose a certain danger by obliterating differences and disparities between the coloniser and the colonised, thus creating a false belief among the Indian élite that they were in fact closer to their European masters than to their fellow countrymen.

On the other hand, these assumptions were also empowering in so far as they offered a certain class of natives a foothold in the coloniser's culture and gave them a common language in which to communicate with the coloniser if not on terms of equality, then at least with some degree of parity. This 'universalism' allowed the Indians to emerge from the confines of Orientalist constructions of the self and acquire the confidence of belonging to a larger, 'modern' community.[11]

Thus English language and literature was not just foisted on the natives as a means of hegemonic control, it also had other effects which were probably not foreseen by Macaulay. A dialectical relationship existed between the colonial government's need to create a class of English-educated loyal administrators and the desire of the Indian élite to use such an education to participate more fully in the workings of the government. While the new learning created a servile 'baboo' class it also helped in the construction of a 'modern', 'secular' identity for the young urban Hindu male and augmented his confidence in himself and his own culture. Thus paradoxically, English education helped to forge a nationalist consciousness and a curiosity about and interest in the wealth of native art and literature. The late nineteenth-century 'Bengal Renaissance' which undertook the revival of a glorious Hindu past was largely a result of the introduction of English education.

This paradox is easily understood if we realise that the Indians' exposure to western modernity was not a one-way process. It involved a complex negotiation in which the interests of the urban élite had to be accommodated and protected. This emerging class required a form of western learning which would not upset the Hindu social hierarchies while offering a means of breaking away from certain orthodoxies. English studies from the beginning had to accommodate the caste, class and gender divisions of this new, urbanised society. This is reflected in the very naming of the new college of 'modernisation' as Hindu College.[12] Thus Indian modernity shaped under colonial rule is an interesting amalgam of both mimicry of and resistance to western paradigms.[13]

Shakespeare and the New Woman

Important texts for understanding this contested colonial modernity are the nineteenth-century Bengali translations of Shakespeare, whose works were seen as the repository of 'modern' western values. The process of linguistic translation was also a process of cultural transaction: issues of loyalty to the original text of Shakespeare became also a matter of political affiliation involving questions of endorsing the imperial project of westernisation or resisting it.

In adapting Shakespeare's works to a Bengali milieu, the translators were forced to transform, indigenise and appropriate western ideals and practices in a distinctively Indian manner. These translations represent early responses of the colonised subject to European culture and his/her attempts to fashion an Indian identity through these encounters with western modernity, not uncritically, but with reference to the subject's own traditions. Bengalis were seeking a self-definition which would allow them to be modern without losing their cultural specificity and dignity.

One area in which Shakespeare's plays provided a rich hunting ground was in the shaping of Bengali womanhood. The heroines of the plays were held up as models to be emulated by the new urban gentlewoman, the 'bhadramahila', who was educated, intelligent, but also dutiful. She was required to be independent and yet subservient to her husband.

These contradictions in the ideals of the Bengali housewife emanate from the larger debate between modernity and tradition of which the New Woman becomes a focus. Colonial paradigms of the 'modern' woman and the Victorian companionate marriage in which the woman is a friend rather than a subordinate triggered off a series of revaluations of and reforms for Indian women. On the one hand, the condition of Indian women was deplored and their degeneration criticised; on the other, elaborate defences were written proving the superiority of traditional Indian womanhood, adducing examples from myth and legend. This insistence on tradition betrays the colonised élite's anxiety about their fast diminishing influence over the only sphere they controlled – the home. It is therefore unsurprising that the fashioning of the New Woman becomes a central concern in the natives' complicated negotiations with western modernity and in the evolution of nationalism.[14]

In the nineteenth-century Shakespeare translations, the heroines are indigenised to become interesting amalgams of western modernity and Hindu tradition. While the native intelligence, efficiency and domestic skills of the Portias and the innocence and intensity of the Mirandas and Juliets are praised as qualities worth emulating, their independence

and impulsiveness is toned down to make them into ideal Hindu 'bhadramahilas'. Something similar happens in the treatment of Desdemona's character in the translations of *Othello* and later in its post-colonial negotiation in *Saptapadi*, where the Desdemona character emerges as a perfect combination of the spiritedness of a European heroine and the submissiveness of a Hindu bride.

Gender, race and Indian *Othellos*

In the colonial translations of *Othello* (translated as *Bhimsingha* by Tarini Charan Pal in 1875 and by Debendranath Basu in 1919)[15] Desdemona is represented as the New Woman who defies her father and family to marry the man of her choice, but she is subservient to her husband and dies unprotestingly when accused wrongly of adultery. Thus she is a modern 'sati' who dies to protect her husband's honour.

In an essay entitled 'Shakuntala, Miranda and Desdemona', Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, perhaps the most important and prolific writer of nineteenth-century Bengal, compares Shakespeare's heroines to those of the classical Sanskrit poet Kalidasa and finds them to be better 'satis' than their Indian sisters. Both Desdemona and Shakuntala display an independence of spirit in choosing their husbands, but Desdemona scores more points as a 'sati' because she does not lash out at her husband as Shakuntala does.[16] She emerges as a more successful combination of the ancient and the modern than the classical Hindu heroine of Kalidasa. Even in post-colonial adaptations of *Othello*, Desdemona's defiance of her father and the implications it has for the construction of the modern Indian woman's identity assumes the greatest importance. Utpal Dutt, in his book on Shakespeare's social consciousness, includes Desdemona with the spirited and independent heroines of Shakespearean comedy and romance like Hermia, Jessica and Imogen who follow their impulses with charm and aplomb.[17]

Dealing as it does with marriage and love, *Othello* has generic affinities with comedy or domestic drama rather than with heroic or classical tragedy.[18] 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. The concerns of gender and women's identity receive much greater prominence than racial issues. In *Saptapadi* too, following the tradition of colonial adaptations of *Othello*, the focus is on the themes of love, romance and marriage. Race is only one component in the romantic plot. This affects the generic expectations of the film,

which ends in happy conjugality rather than in the tragic collapse of an interracial marriage.

The silence about racial issues in colonial adaptations of *Othello* was not solely because of the colonial pedagogical strategy which sought to erase the racial context of the play as was clearly the case in South Africa.[19] Nineteenth-century race theories were perhaps also responsible for this silence. Most Orientalist histories traced the origin of both Hindus and Europeans to a common Aryan stock.[20] As such, no racial divide was perceived to exist between the coloniser and colonised. This theory was happily accepted and developed by Indian historians too. Thus, the Indian reader, adapter or translator of *Othello* would more readily identify with the Europeans than with the black character. Othello's predicament in a white society, his alienation and otherness, is not seen as providing a parallel to the situation of the Indian colonised subject. In a few translations, Othello is not even represented as being racially different from the other characters of the play.

So gender issues rather than racial matters assume importance in colonial interpretations of *Othello* in India. However, in performances involving both Indian and English actors the question of race becomes an undeniable reality which demands attention. As I have argued before, it is in such staging that the impact of the racial juxtaposition gains force.

On 17 August 1848, in a landmark performance of *Othello* in colonial Calcutta at the Sans Souci Theatre, for the first time in the history of English professional theatre in India, an Indian appeared on the stage in the lead role among a predominantly white cast. A young Bengali, Baishnab Charan Adhya, played Othello opposite an English woman, Mrs Anderson, as Desdemona.[21] The production created a huge stir. A letter appeared in the *Calcutta Star* which announced the 'debut of a real unpainted nigger Othello' which had set 'the whole world of Calcutta agog'.[22]

The racial identification between the actor and the role had a certain outrage value but certainly not of the same order as the shock and indignation generated by mixed-cast productions of *Othello* in the west.[23] Indian actors do not evoke the same kind of horror. In fact they are commended for their efforts at participating in the 'superior' culture of their colonial masters. Praising Audhya's heroic attempts, 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 centred in the young aspirant

for dramatic fame, who has gallantly flung down his gauntlet to the rest of the members of the native community... Shakespeare, exiled from the country he honours so much, seeks an asylum on the Calcutta boards... Slim and symmetrical in person, his delivery was somewhat cramped, but under all circumstances his pronunciation of English was for a native remarkably good... The performer had substantial demonstration that the feelings of the audience were fairly enlisted on his side.[24]

Playing Othello becomes not a means of finding a way to articulate the alienation and exploitation of an oppressed people, but of imitating better the highest achievements of European civilisation. This is what happens to the young Bengali hero of *Saptapadi*. Enacting Othello provides him with the opportunity to become more fully a part of European culture which is equated with modernity and progress. But his negotiations with a western paradigm of modernity is neither simple nor easy.

Saptapadi: the seven steps of marriage

A postcolonial film set in colonial times, *Saptapadi* (the seven steps of marriage) is a romantic melodrama about the love of a young Bengali boy for an 'English' girl.[25] The film is structured around a performance of *Othello* which is used as a paradigm to validate this inter-racial romance.

As in colonial readings of the play, marriage, sexual relationships and the role of women continue to be central concerns, but not at the cost of racial issues. In *Saptapadi*, made in post-independence India in the 1960s – a decade which witnessed historic international movements for racial and gender equality – marriage becomes a site for interrogating issues of race, nationalism and Indian identity.

The film is set in colonial India of the early 1940s and begins with shots of the Second World War. This is particularly significant because the war years were a period of British–Indian collaboration when the colonial masters needed to depend on their subjects for survival. This was also a time when Indians realised that the Raj was practically over and the famous Quit India movement was launched in 1942. In the face of the imminent collapse of the Empire and the birth of an independent Indian nation, questions of national identity assumed immense importance.

The film explores these issues through the evolving relationship of the Bengali Krishnendu (literally 'the dark moon') and the 'English' Rina Brown, who symbolise the changing face of British–Indian interaction. We see a very confident, strident and modern Indian identity emerging in the hero who refuses to allow matters of race, nationality or religion to interfere with his choice of a partner. But this liberal, secular and modern selfhood seems irreconcilable with an indigenous identity and can be achieved only by sacrificing it. *Othello* provides both a precedent and a justification for this process.

The dark son of Kali

Krishnendu and Rina are both students at the Calcutta Medical College and he is infatuated with her. For Rina, however, he is a 'blackie' and thus not even within romantic reckoning. She is in love with an English boy, Clayton, who seems to humour her but is not very enthusiastic about the relationship. The battle lines are drawn between Clayton and Krishnendu, not only over Rina but in the spheres of sports and academia.[26] The Indian is shown to excel in all areas much to the consternation of Rina. He is represented as aggressively and proudly Indian, dressed in dhoti-kurta, defending his nation and race against every calumny. Mischievous, humorous, able and charming, he is a perfect foil to the stiff-upper-lipped, strait-laced Englishman.

But the film makes amply clear that Krishnendu's reiterated 'Indianness' is not an impediment to his participation in a progressive, scientific culture. He is training to be a doctor and wishes to go to England to pursue higher studies. He has differences with his Hindu father who considers going abroad a sin and is opposed to his son's liberal views and lax attitude towards tradition.

Krishnendu's character thus seems to represent a nationalist modernity. He evokes Hindu tropes to defend his culture against attacks from Rina but he is not limited by them. When she calls him a 'darkie', he retorts by saying he is proud to be one since all Indians are sons of Kali, the dark mother goddess of the Hindus. Kali is invoked again as the fierce and exotic protector of the black nations when Krishnendu adeptly sings a 'Shyamasangeet' (a typical devotional song dedicated to Kali) to drown the loud music at Rina's birthday party. He is deeply embedded in the native culture but not blinded by it as his father is. This duality between tradition and modernity is interestingly expressed through the human skull that he carries during the song – although he uses it as if it were an accessory for the tantric rites of Kali, the goddess of death, it is in fact an aid for his medical studies. His insistence from the very beginning that he is an atheist makes nonsense of the charges

of heathenism directed by Rina against him. For her, Krishnendu is always the stereotypical 'native' who predictably desires her but is not even worth a glance. It seems impossible that Rina and Krishnendu would ever be able to meet on an equal footing. Such an opportunity is thrown up by an amateur performance of *Othello* at their college where Rina plays Desdemona opposite Krishnendu's Othello.

Othello and the space of the modern

Initially Othello is supposed to be played by Clayton. At the rehearsals he appears awkward and uninspired and Krishnendu steps in to show the Englishman how to put more life into Shakespeare. He tells Clayton that his stilted delivery would horrify Shakespeare had he heard him. Unable to demonstrate the strangling scene with the incensed Rina Brown, he bends over a bearded male friend gingerly and speaks Othello's lines magnificently. Rina expostulates and calls him a buffoon. In response, he breaks a coconut with his bare hands and walks off. This is perhaps meant to convey his strangeness and power, both of which qualities make him a closer kin of the Moor than Clayton can ever be.

On the day of the performance, Clayton does not arrive and Krishnendu has to fill in for him. As he sits at the makeup table, having his face blackened, he simultaneously slips into two roles – those of Clayton and of Othello. Being Othello, paradoxically for Krishnendu, is also being English, or at least finding a voice for himself in the highest reaches of the coloniser's culture. It is less about identifying himself with an alienated black consciousness and more about participating in the exclusive, privileged and charmed circle of white people through appropriating a role which was meant for Clayton. As Othello, Krishnendu can share a stage bed with the white Desdemona, something which appeared impossible in the social space of colonial India. So a performance of the play provides an opportunity for an intimate physical encounter of people otherwise divided by historical and political circumstances.

The murder scene is enacted in a Wellesian melodramatic mode with stark contrasts in black and white. The voices sound very British, particularly Desdemona's. Tellingly, the lines are spoken not by the Bengali actors playing Rina and Krishnendu, both of whose English was heavily accented, but by actors from Geoffrey Kendall's Shakespeare troupe.[27] This ventriloquism and role-playing thus has several layers.

Krishnendu as Clayton-Othello enjoys a certain proximity with Rina on stage. But, initially repulsed by the prospect of a 'native' touching her,

she asks Krishnendu to keep a distance. This results in a strange, 'apartheid', *Othello* which is manifested in rather awkward missed kisses on stage. Rina's racial paranoia is an example of what Dympna Callaghan has described as a confusion of 'exhibition' and 'art' resulting in a crisis of mimesis: 'it ceases to be acting, becoming not the representation of the-thing-itself but, instead, *the-thing-in-itself*'.[28] While a white actor can be thought able to represent Othello's blackness, a black or Asiatic actor is considered capable only of demonstrating his own negritude, unable to go beyond what is held to be the undeniable 'reality' of his colour.

But belying Rina's apprehensions, it is art rather than nature which weaves its magic on stage. Through the performance and the physical intimacy it breeds, she falls in love with Krishnendu-as-Othello. The enactment of the murder scene transforms the story of the tragic collapse of a mixed-race marriage into an enabling condition for a mixed-race relationship. The stage provides a secular space which is untouched by Rina's prejudices about 'heathen blackies' and Krishnendu's father's orthodox Hinduism. The physical realities of performance thus challenge racial stereotypes. Shakespeare, not so much textually, but performatively opens up possibilities of a modernity unavailable in other spheres of life.

However, this modernity is severely limited and limiting. It comes at the cost of losing one's indigenous identity. Krishnendu's performance as Othello ends with the curtains but his role as surrogate Clayton continues as he takes up the Englishman's function as suitor to Rina Brown. Soon after mutual declarations of undying love for each other, he converts to Christianity at the insistence of Rina's father and when she deserts him, he ends up adopting the archetypal role of evangelical colonialism – that of the missionary priest.

He is disowned by his Hindu father who is outraged by his son's conversion. In an interesting inversion we see the Othello figure, rather than Desdemona, making the crucial break with the paternal home and culture to further his individual choice in marriage. One wonders whether this can be regarded as a 'feminisation' of Krishnendu's character since it would be considered unmanly to give in to the wife's culture as he does. In colonial Bengal, the most commonly-used epithet for the anglicised Bengali 'baboos' who had sold off their motherland to the English was 'effeminate'. But *Saptapadi* is also trying to create new paradigms of masculinity and gender parity and is challenging these old ideas even while using them. The film uses Othello to construct the modern Indian male as the colonial versions of the play tried to construct the 'bhadramahila' or the New Woman.

Krishnendu renounces the feudal patriarchy and Hindu orthodoxy represented by his father in the interest of a liberal, secular, modern outlook, but manages only to mimic the English uncritically. In his attempts to become an appropriate partner for Rina, he loses his Indian identity and his cheeky resistance against Anglicisation which is evident in the earlier part of the film. The poised balance of modernity and tradition in his character is flattened out.

The 'racial' differences between the two protagonists are deliberately underplayed and erased in the interest of the romantic ending which *Othello* lacks and the popular cinema must provide. The asymmetries of race and gender which characterise the play are too disturbing for *Saptapadi*. In the film, the hero's racial 'inferiority' must be cancelled through his assimilation into white, Christian society and the heroine too must be chastised for humiliating the hero and must occupy a suitably subordinate position. Accordingly, the film reveals that Rina is not a pure-bred English girl. Her mother is a humble Indian servant who was raped by her English father. So she is half Indian after all, which explains her attraction to Krishnendu and diffuses the scandalousness of their relationship somewhat.

Her 'Indianness' also accounts for her subsequent behaviour as a self-sacrificing 'sati' figure. When Krishnendu's father asks her to leave his son alone, she obliges as an obedient Indian daughter-in-law would.[29] Her devotion finally wins over the recalcitrant old man, but by this time she has been devastated by the revelation of her birth details. Her pride in her racial and religious superiority lies shattered. She takes to drinking and is brought in a state of inebriation to the mission hospital which Krishnendu runs as the resident Jesuit priest. Revived by him, she recounts the sordid tale of her disillusionment and loss of faith. Krishnendu tries to restore her belief in humanity. A sermon on the universalism of the religion of Man follows, which is visually reinforced by the images of Hindu prophets alongside those of Christ. But this attempt at transcending religion and opening up a secular space is collapsed in the final scene which shows Krishnendu carrying Rina towards a church with the intention of being united in the eye of a patently Christian God.

The nascent project of forging an Indian secular modernity ends rather disappointingly. It appears that little advance has been made from the nineteenth century which believed that progress lay only in the embracing of western values and religion. Like Othello, Krishnendu has to kill the 'malignant Turk', the Other within the Self, in order to achieve the status of a hero since heroism remains unavailable to the black or the Indian protagonist.

Othello, Hollywood melodrama and the 1960s

I have examined how Shakespeare's *Othello* helps in articulating the colonial subject's encounters with modernity, however restricted the parameters of that modernity might be. In *Saptapadi* it is also apparent how the coming-of-age of Bengali cinema is effected through its interactions with Hollywood and is mediated through *Othello*.

The image of the liberated American heroine who makes independent choices throws up a challenge to Bengali cinema which is answered through a character like Rina Brown, who nevertheless needs to be validated through the authority of Shakespeare. Rina's decision to marry Krishnendu needs to be put in the context of *Othello* to become acceptable on the Bengali screen. The play performs a mediating role in the negotiations of Bengali cinema with Hollywood just as it had provided a template for the emergence of the 'New Woman' in its colonial incarnations.

The popular melodramatic American cinema of the 1950s focused on the individual and on the carving out of an independent domestic space for the central romantic protagonists.[30] Tollygunge responded to these films with its own romantic melodramas which were concerned primarily with heterosexual couple formation.[31] These films characteristically marked a transition from the traditional extended family to conceptions of a new domesticity which was constituted by the couple in exclusion of rest of the society.[32]

The famous shot of Krishnendu and Rina on a motorbike driving for what seems like an eternity and singing the phenomenally popular song 'If this road should never end' articulates the desire for freedom from social and familial pressures of a generation of Bengalis who were witnessing the sexual revolution sweeping the west, but were unable to find an Indian voice to express their own changed perceptions about the relationship of the sexes. This emphasis on the autonomy of the couple and on the conjugal space as opposed to the familial, comes to represent a desire for modernity, for independence from older and cumbrous social structures.[33] This is a modified re-articulation of the colonial subject's attempts to reject Hindu orthodoxy and embrace 'modern', western values without surrendering his/her Indian identity. For both the colonial subject and the post-colonial Bengali of the 1960s, Shakespeare provides a useful paradigm for negotiating western modernity, whether British or American.

By bringing an intensely private bedroom scene onto the public stage, *Othello* creates a space of sexual freedom. The sheer shock of witnessing a consummation-like murder of a white woman by a black man challenges

bourgeois morality. It is therefore unsurprising that Hollywood even now can make a sensational, popular thriller out of *Othello*.[34] However problematic the actual implications of the killing are, *Saptapadi* manages to find in it a sexual openness which challenges the conservatism not just of Indian middle-class life, but also the conservatism of screen images or stage performances. Interestingly, one of the characters in *Saptapadi* remarks wonderingly about the *Othello* performance, 'Good Lord, are men and women going to act together then?'

Thus it is not just *Othello* as a text, but the entire culture of Shakespearean performance which clears out an area for a more uninhibited interaction among the sexes and among classes and races. At the cost of glossing over the misogyny and racial prejudices embedded in the text, *Saptapadi* wrests from it a sense of freedom and modernity, which is severely circumscribed but, in its hesitant way, is nevertheless meaningful. The model of this modernity remains essentially western, but it does provide a space for a dialogue between cultures, unavailable elsewhere.

Notes

1. Critical opinion on how far Othello is representative of a black consciousness is divided. Critics like Ruth Cowhig point out the uniqueness of Othello's role as hero on the Renaissance stage which usually portrayed black characters as humorous or comic ('Blacks in English Renaissance drama and the role of Shakespeare's Othello,' *The Black Presence in English Literature*, ed. David Dabydeen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989) 1–25). Leslie Fiedler, in *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (Hertfordshire: Paladin, 1974), contends that despite the many references to Othello's blackness, he ends up as 'colourless: a provincial gentleman warrior, a downright English soldier . . .' (160). In *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989) 48, Ania Loomba however disagrees with Fiedler and sees Othello's character as effecting a passage from 'an honorary white to a total outsider.'
2. Ben Okri recounts how the experience of watching Othello in a theatre with a predominantly white audience permanently changed his perception of the play ('Meditations on Othello,' *West Africa* (23 and 30 March 1987) 562–3). In '"Othello was a white man": Properties of Race on Shakespeare's Stage,' *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage* (London: Routledge, 2000) 75–96, Dympna Callaghan points out how the convention of having white actors play Othello has influenced not just our understanding of the play but also of racial politics. Theatrical experiments such as the 1997–98 Lansburgh Theatre (Washington) production of the 'photo-negative' *Othello*, directed by Jude Kelly, with an all-black cast with the exception of the title role, which is played by the solitary white actor (Patrick Stewart), testify to the abiding importance that performance and the visual impact of colour politics still has on our readings of *Othello*.

3. *Saptapadi* belongs to the era of black-and-white films featuring Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen which started in 1953 and continued into the late 1960s, creating the most popular star couple and a series of films which enjoyed unprecedented success. The films have become classics and continue to live in people's imaginations through revivals on television, video circulation and reruns of the audio cassettes of their music.
4. For the ideological underpinnings of the introduction of English studies in colonial India see Gauri Vishwanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989).
5. Thomas B. Macaulay, 'Minute on Indian Education,' 1835. Reprinted in *Thomas Babington Macaulay: Selected Writings*, ed. J. Clive and T. Pinney (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1972) 729.
6. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lamm (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 1–80.
7. The English had in fact successfully created the kind of 'hybrid' subject envisaged by Macaulay in the Bengali 'baboos'. This was a class of English-educated bureaucrats, loyal to the government, critical of their own culture, in whom the British administration had implicit faith and who actually made the functioning of the colonial government possible even in the face of bitter nationalist opposition.
8. Jyotsna G. Singh, 'Shakespeare and the Civilising Mission,' *Colonial Narratives/Cultural Dialogues* (London: Routledge, 1996) 124–7.
9. J. Bagchi, 'Shakespeare in Loin Cloths: English Literature and the Early Nationalist Consciousness in Bengal,' *Rethinking English: Essays in Literature, Language, History*, ed. Svati Joshi (New Delhi: Trianka, 1991) 151.
10. Bagchi 150.
11. Ania Loomba describes this new English education as offering a 'programme of building a new man who would feel himself a citizen of the world while the very face of the world was being constructed in the mirror of the dominant culture of the West.' *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* 21.
12. Bagchi 148.
13. Homi Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside New Delhi – May 1817,' *Critical Inquiry* 12: 1 (1985) 162.
14. Dipesh Chakravarty, 'The Difference–Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal,' *Subaltern Studies VIII*, ed. David Arnold and David Hardiman (Delhi: OUP, 1994) 52–88: 'It was thus that the idea of the "new woman" came to be written into the techniques of the self that nationalism evolved, which looked on the domestic as an inseparable part of the national. The public sphere could not be erected without reconstructing the private' (58).
15. Subir Raychaudhuri ed., *Bilati Jatra theke Swadeshi Theatre* (Calcutta: Jadavpur University, 1972) Appendix I.
16. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay and Sajanikanta Das eds, *Bijnan-rahasya, Samya, Vividh Prabandha* (Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 1938) 86–7.
17. U. Dutt, *Shakespeare-er Samaj Chetana* (Calcutta: M. C. Sarkar and Sons, 1986) 11.

18. Barbara Heliodora C. deMendonça, '*Othello*: A Tragedy Built on a Comic Structure,' *Shakespeare Survey* 21(1968): 31–8.
19. Martin Orkin, 'Othello and the "plain face" of racism,' *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38 (1987): 166–88, and *Shakespeare Against Apartheid* (Craighall: A. D. Donker, 1987).
20. Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998) 66–92; Peter Robb ed., *The Concept of Race in South Asia* (Delhi: OUP, 1995) 165–218; 282–303.
21. For a detailed discussion of this production see Jyotsna Singh and Sudipto Chatterjee, 'Moor or Less: The Surveillance of Othello, Calcutta, 1848,' *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, ed. Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (London: Routledge, 1999) 65–82.
22. Kironmoy Raha (*Bengali Theatre*, New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1978) as quoted in *Shakespeare on the Calcutta Stage: A Checklist*, ed. Ananda Lal and Sukanta Chaudhuri (Kolkata: Papyrus, 2001) 22.
23. Dympna Callaghan mentions nineteenth-century American performances in which white actresses like Ellen Tree played Desdemona opposite black actors and created great distress and concern to the white community who did not want 'their' women to be 'pawed' by black men. The spectre of miscegenation is raised by the visual impact of seeing a mixed race couple on stage. See '"Othello was a white man": Properties of Race on Shakespeare's Stage,' in Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women* (London: Routledge, 2000) 90–1.
24. *Bengal Hurkura*, 19 August 1848. Quoted in Lal and Chaudhuri 22.
25. Alochaya Productions, 1961, black and white, direction and script, Ajoy Kar, lead roles, Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen.
26. The shots of the football match in which Krishnendu ousts Clayton deliberately echo scenes from nationalist sporting history, particularly the match between Mohunbagan, a 'native' Calcutta team who could not even afford football boots, and a team of well equipped 'Goras' or whites, which ended in an Indian victory. The recent Hindi film *Lagaan* (dir. Ashutosh Gowariker, perf. Aamir Khan, Gracy Singh, Paul Blackthorne and Suhasini Muley. India: Aamir Khan Productions, 2001) explores these issues through a colonial cricket match played between a British and an Indian team.
27. Othello is dubbed by Utpal Dutt who started his career in Kendall's troupe and then went on to found the Indian People's Theatre and to translate and produce several Shakespearean plays.
28. Callaghan 91.
29. *Saptapadi*'s heroine carries resonances of Bankim Chandra's characterisation of Desdemona as 'sati'. She is like the reconstructed 'New Woman' who can be both modern and traditional.
30. Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama' (1972), *Movies and Methods*, Vol. II, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 165–89 and Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
31. Tollygunge is the name of the area in which the Calcutta film studios are concentrated. Like Hollywood, the name has become a metonymy for Bengali films.

32. Moinak Biswas, 'The Couple and Their Spaces: *Harano Sur* as Melodrama Now,' *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, ed. Ravi Vasudevan (New Delhi: OUP, 2000) 122–42.
33. Madhava Prasad, 'Cinema and the Desire for Modernity,' *Journal of Arts and Ideas* (1993): 25–6.
34. The Oliver Parker film made in 1995. For an excellent discussion on the sensationalism of the film see Pascale Aebischer, 'Black Rams Tupping White Ewes: Race vs. Gender in the Final Scene of Six *Othellos*,' *Retrovisions: Historical Make-overs in Film and Literature*, ed. D. Cartmell *et al.* (London: Pluto, 2001) 59–73.