Shakespeare SURVEY 75

Othello

SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

75

Othello

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SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

75

Othello

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EMMA SMITH

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Shakespeare Survey 75 has as its theme '*Othello*'. Volume 76 will take up the theme of the International Shakespeare Conference, to be held in Stratford-upon-Avon in 2022, 'Shakespeare, the Virtual and the Digital': submissions on this topic are warmly encouraged and should be sent as email attachments to the editor at emma.smith@hertford.ox.ac.uk. The deadline is 1 September 2022. The following issue, 77, will be on Shakespeare's poetry, with a deadline of 1 September 2023. There is also limited space in each issue for articles not on the theme. The Advisory Board is particularly keen to encourage proposals for small clusters of 3–5 articles on a Shakespearian theme, topic or approach. These can be submitted to the editor at any time in the year. All submissions are read by the editor and by at least one member of the Advisory Board. We warmly welcome both early-career and more established scholars to consider *Survey* as a venue for their work.

Part of *Survey*'s distinctiveness is its reviews. Review copies, including article offprints, should be addressed to the editor at Hertford College, Oxford OX1 3BW: our reviewers inevitably have to exercise some selection about what they cover. On that note, I am most grateful to Russell Jackson and Jane Kingsley-Smith, who step down as *Survey* reviewers with their contributions to the current issue.

Emma Smith

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ILLUSTRATIONS

UNDERSTANDING *IAGO*, AN ITALIAN FILM ADAPTATION OF *OTHELLO*: CLIENTELISM, CORRUPTION, POLITICS

MARK THORNTON BURNETT

'Liberamente inspirati dell' "OTELLO" di WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE' ('loosely based on William Shakespeare's *Othello*'), according to the closing credits, *Iago* (dir. Volfango di Biasi, 2009) was released on 27 February 2009 (in Italy only). While the film takes *Othello* as its source of stimulation, it reimagines the play in several key respects. It features a lengthy 'preface', taking some considerable time (over half of the film's length) to set up the drama of act 1. Approximating iambic pentameter with a demotic Italian vernacular, *Iago* then proceeds to follow the plot and structure of *Othello* quite closely. But completing the film's adaptive excess is an 'additional act': this 'extra' screen time shifts the anticipated ending of *Othello* and delivers a narrative attendant upon, and emerging from, the Shakespearian conclusions of act 5.

Perhaps most distinctively, *Iago* offers us Iago's backstory rather than Othello's, envisioning the lieutenant 'of exceeding honesty' as the wronged hero of the piece (*Othello*, 3.3.262). In a symptomatic scene, Brabanzio (Gabriele Lavia), the Rector of the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Venice (and father to the beautiful Desdemona (Laura Chiatti)), luxuriates in his impeccably appointed office. Velvet-suited, and sporting a gold earring and dark cravat, he simultaneously suggests a Doge, a headmaster and a supercilious *paterfamilias*. As befits his high-ranking position, the gorgeous office overlooks a sun-dappled courtyard in which manicured hedges frame marble statuary, a fountain spurts from a grotto and trimmed trees sway gently in the breeze. Here to protest is Iago (Nicolas Vaporidis), the Faculty's most brilliant – but impoverished – student. Thanks to a backroom deal dreamed up by Brabanzio and world-renowned architect Philippe Moreau (Mamadou Dioume), Otello (Aurélien Gaya), Moreau's son, Black and hailing from Paris, has been parachuted in to lead the Faculty's entry to the city's Biennale event. Even though Iago is doing all the work, he remains an uncredited assistant. 'Otello . . . hasn't got a grasp . . . I've had to do everything', Iago complains. Brabanzio's reply highlights his own imbrication in nepotism and corruption: 'I value your discretion . . . the university senate made the . . . choice . . . we'd have to make a big fuss . . . Our profession is complicated . . . it's politics.' His unwillingness to countenance Iago's complaint, and the obvious cultivation of clientelism, speak to what historian Paul Ginsborg identifies in contemporary Italy as a 'patrimonialism' undergirded by 'fierce acquisitive instincts . . . family ambitions and clan loyalties'.[1] Disillusioned at the revelation of a 'politics' that is denying him his due, Iago leaves the Venetian office with an even greater sense of embitterment.

Iago joins a long list of Shakespeare-inspired Italian films, including *Che cosa sonole le nuvole?* ('What are Clouds For?', dir. Pier Paulo Pasolini, 1967), *Un Ameleto di meno* ('One Hamlet More',

[1] Paul Ginsborg, *Silvio Berlusconi: Television, Power and Patrimony* (London and New York, 2004), p. 6.

dir. Carmelo Bene, 1972), *Sud side stori* ('South Side Story', dir. Roberta Torre, 2000), *Cesare deve morire* ('Caesar Must Die', dir. Paolo and Vittoria Taviani, 2012) and *La stoffa dei sogni* ('The Stuff of Dreams', dir. Gianfranco Cabiddu, 2016) – adaptations of *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar* and *The Tempest*, respectively.[2] To this list must be added *The Taming of the Shrew* (dir. Franco Zeffirelli, 1967) and *Romeo and Juliet* (dir. Franco Zeffirelli, 1968), which are forever associated with Italy thanks to ravishing cinematography and the *auteur* status of their director, and which, in their day, set new standards in terms of orientation, casting and aesthetics.[3] Generalizations in such a wide-ranging generic sample are hazardous, but it is possible to maintain that the Italian Shakespeare film is marked by a suggestive deployment of natural and urban locations, a critical privileging of regional and class rivalries and an absorption in political legacies. In this sense, *Iago* is true to form. At the same time, *Iago* follows in the footsteps of, and takes some of its energy from, its immediate 'Venice-set film' forebears, including *Othello* (dir. Oliver Parker, 1995) and *William Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice'* (dir. Michael Radford, 2004), imitating the studied use of setting but moving away from the early modern period by situating the story firmly in the contemporary. The alliance with the contemporary – action in the here and now unfolds against the period backdrop of Venice – signals one of the ways in which, while linked to other films, *Iago* is simultaneously something of a curiosity in the history of Italian cinema's engagement with Shakespeare. In a singular combination, the film endorses a variety of genres and influences (it functions as both 'teen film' and 'Venice-set film'), looking outwards and inwards in its discovery of disappointment, excess and post-millennial Italian angst. Operating thus, it brings into play some of the themes and trends of what has been termed the 'Berlusconi era' (named after the politician and media baron Silvio Berlusconi, prime minister of Italy in a series of four governments during 1994–1995, 2001–2006 and 2008–2011).[4] *Iago* takes on additional complexions of meaning, this article argues, in the light of accusations surrounding Berlusconi during his tenure in power, including collusion, conflict of interest, fraud and abuse of power.[5]

The film's Italian identifiers are easy to spot. As a 'Venice-set film', understood by film critics Michael Pigott and Anna Sloan as a genre that prioritizes an 'urban-marine playground' of 'picturesque beauty' and 'moral depravity', *Iago* announces a subscription to authentic settings (apart from some sequences in Castelfranco Veneto, the film was shot entirely in Venice itself) and a *mise en scène* comprised of murky waterways, shimmering palazzos, sun-baked squares and ornately arched bridges.[6] As a 'teen film' conceptualized around architecture students, *Iago* makes of

[2] For discussion of these adaptations, see Mark Thornton Burnett, *'Hamlet' and World Cinema* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 41–4; Martin Butler, 'A *Tempest* between Naples and Sardinia: Gianfranco Cabiddu's *La stoffa dei sogni*', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 37 (2019), 209–340; Maurizio Calbi, *Spectral Shakespeares: Media Adaptations in the Twenty-First Century* (New York, 2013), pp. 81–98; Sonia Massai, 'Subjection and redemption in Pasolini's *Othello*', in *World-wide Shakespeares: Local Appropriations in Film and Performance*, ed. Sonia Massai (New York and London, 2005), pp. 95–103; Mariangela Tempera, 'Shakespeare behind Italian bars: the Rebibbia Project, *The Tempest*, and *Caesar Must Die*', in *Shakespeare, Italy, and Transnational Exchange: Early Modern to Present*, ed. Enza De Francisci and Chris Stamatakis (New York and London, 2017), pp. 265–76.

[3] See Mark Thornton Burnett, Courtney Lehmann, Marguerite Rippy and Ramona Wray, *Great Shakespeareans: Welles, Kurosawa, Kozintsev, Zeffirelli* (London and New York, 2013), pp. 141–86.

[4] John Foot, *Modern Italy*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke and New York, 2014), p. 15.

[5] Daniele Albertazzi and Nina Rothenburg, 'Introduction: this tide is not for turning', in *Resisting the Tide: Cultures of Opposition under Berlusconi (2001–06)*, ed. Daniele Albertazzi, Clodagh Brook, Charlotte Ross and Nina Rothenburg (New York and London, 2009), pp. 1–16, esp. p. 2; Maria Elisa Montironi, 'Narrating and unravelling Italian crises through Shakespeare (2000–2016)', in *Shakespeare and Crisis: One Hundred Years of Italian Narratives*, ed. Silvia Bigliazzi (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2020), pp. 245–75, esp. p. 260.

[6] Michael Pigott, 'Introduction', in *World Film Locations: Venice*, ed. Michael Pigott (Bristol, 2013), p. 5; Anna Sloan, 'The tourist gaze', in *World Film Locations: Venice*, ed. Pigott, pp. 8–9.

Venice a campus. It takes the imprint of *William Shakespeare's 'Romeo + Juliet'* (dir. Baz Luhrmann, 1996) and related high-school Shakespeare films such as *'O'* (dir. Tim Blake Nelson, 2001), detailing the intrigues and passions of its quintessentially youthful cast. In this way, it makes youthful the archetypal 'Venice-set film' while prioritizing the city's association with romance.[7] (The DVD version of the film released in Italy included a postcard invitation to enter a competition – 'Venice in Love' – to win a romantic weekend for two at the Palazzo Priuli, San Marco; see Figure 1).

In keeping with a film aesthetic that makes much of appearances and possessions – costume credits for *Iago* reference Bulgari, Chanel, Dolce & Gabbana and Gucci – the adaptation spotlights the trappings of wealth and entitlement as part of its rationale. The fashion-shoot elements of this *Othello* thus serve both market-driven and narrative-centred purposes. Venice, as *Iago* represents it, as well as signifying a wonderfully evocative series of period structures and places, is something of a catwalk – a luxury location populated by equally luxurious people and consumables. Except for Iago, who, in a sartorial illustration of his downtrodden position and as an index of his distance from haute couture, is shot throughout in shabby dark jacket and trousers, most of the film's players are photographed to show off in a manner akin to a *Vogue* editorial. Furthermore, as part of a repurposing of the play's characters and relationships, the lovelorn longings of Roderigo (Lorenzo Gleijeses) in *Othello* are displaced in the film on to Iago, while the homoeroticism of the Iago–Othello relationship is freshly located in the Roderigo character. Roderigo, brother in the film to Bianca (Luana Rossetti), is played as gay and camp and dressed in open shirt, necklace, outrageous collars, sequins, and puce coloured jackets. In *Iago*, Iago and Emilia (Giulia Steigerwalt) are friends rather than husband and wife, with Emilia's concomitantly extended role registered in her dominatrix-style black leather outfit, furs, studded bodice and chains (fashion as bondage). Perhaps, most strikingly, Otello and Cassio (Fabio Ghidoni) in *Iago* are cousins: their new relation both underscores the praxes of nepotism that the film makes its partial subject (one leads, and the other is second assistant on, the team entering the Biennale event) and points up defining monetary accoutrements. As Drake Stutesman notes, in what could be a summation of the film's fashion-aware preferences, 'fashion is the sweep of a Look (a lifestyle)' or 'a message'.[8] While Cassio is arresting in his casually draped and costly long scarves, Otello makes for a socially dominant impression with a gym-toned physique accentuated by tight-fitting cashmere top and polo shirts and accessorized by a crucial property – a pristine white handkerchief.

As Shakespeare adaptation, *Iago* has only been occasionally considered in Shakespeare on film criticism, possibly because it was not internationally distributed and fared unimpressively at the Italian box-office.[9] Yet recent developments in adaptation studies and discussion in critical race theory make the film ripe for analysis. In what follows, I argue for a reading of the film that explores representations of race and difference inside intersecting representations of corruption, clientelism and class. The article takes *Iago*'s three engagements with *Othello* – labelled here as *Preface*, *Play* and *Additional Act* – and looks at each in turn to identify the ways in which this Shakespearian adaptation functions to mediate a contemporary Italian crisis.

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[7] Jeff Cotton, 'Venice: city of the imagination', in *World Film Locations: Venice*, ed. Pigott, pp. 6–7, esp. p. 6.

[8] Drake Stutesman, 'Costume design, or, what is fashion in film?', in *Fashion in Film*, ed. Adrienne Munich (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2011), pp. 17–39; pp. 20–1, p. 18.

[9] Sujata Iyengar, 'Beds, handkerchiefs, and moving objects in *Othello*', in *Variable Objects: Shakespeare and Speculative Appropriation*, ed. Valerie M. Fazel and Louise Geddes (Edinburgh, 2021), pp. 21–36, esp. pp. 27–33; Douglas M. Lanier, 'Vlogging the bard: serialization, social media, Shakespeare', in *Broadcast Your Shakespeare: Continuity and Change across Media*, ed. Stephen O'Neill (London and New York, 2018), pp. 185–206, esp. p. 186; Catherine O'Rawe, *Stars and Masculinities in Contemporary Italian Cinema* (Basingstoke and New York, 2014), p. 175.

1 Postcard invitation, accompanying the DVD release of *Iago* (dir. Volfango di Biasi, 2009), to enter a competition to win a romantic break for two in Venice. Medusa Film / author collection.

PREFACE

Kyle Grady writes that Iago's lack of obvious motive allows Shakespeare to develop a 'more mercurial and complicated villain': 'certitude' is replaced 'with loose ends'.[10] In *Iago*, by contrast, the titular character, echoing the phrasing of his Shakespearian counterpart ('People … care about … what you seem to be'), is given a history, a backstory that explains his motivations and allows us to see him and them psychologically. At the start of the film, Iago explains how his origins disenfranchise him and prevent advancement: tousle-haired and sombrely dressed, he recounts the story of abandonment by his 'bricklayer' father, his lack of 'luck' and his generally straitened circumstances ('I borrow books'). Akin to the stereotype of the struggling Renaissance scholar, Iago is labelled a 'poor, starving bookworm' by fellow students. The invocation extends

[10] Kyle Grady, 'Othello, Colin Powell, and post-racial anachronisms', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67 (2016), 68–83; p. 68.

hints in *Othello* at the same time as it builds upon the plotlines of plays such as *Macbeth* (the passing over of the 'brave [and] ... valiant ... captain' (1.1.16, 24, 34) for Malcolm) and *The Merchant of Venice*, that other Venice-set play centred on group forms of stigmatization and exclusion. Understanding Iago in this fashion is also contextually resonant. It suggests that, in a 'debt-ridden' climate, and at a time of rising 'unemployment' and 'widening inequality' in Italy, the figure of a working-class student served as a readily recognizable trope.[11] Certainly, as some historians have suggested, Italy during this period was characterized by 'latent rigidities ... Barriers ... blocked career progress', with 'declining prospects for mobility'.[12] To some extent, then, *Iago* executes a socially responsive operation, forming an alliance both with contemporaneous Italian theatre productions of Shakespeare in which 'characters' serve as 'metaphors for [the] ... unemployed and ... artists', and with Italian cinema's predilection for exploring questions of class and privilege.[13]

The fictive biography legitimizes Iago's idealism. Against a backdrop of disadvantage, he expounds in the campus design studio his thesis of meritocracy, a thesis that runs counter to the realities of what Andrea Mammone and Giuseppe A. Veltri term Italy's 'non-meritocratic system'.[14] 'I have a dream', Iago states, elaborating: 'in a far-away kingdom ... is a happy place ... a fair and ordered world where people are free and flourish.' The visual expression of his philosophy is the model city he has built, with its stairwell leading to the heavens (suggestive of disencumbered progress) and a spatial organization that enables 'desire' and 'love'. Repeatedly, Iago is discovered in visionary mode, as when, for example, he holds forth in a Biennale pavilion about his 'city of the future': the camera pans expansively over computer graphics of civic spaces, and soaring buildings, a dreamscape of opportunity fired by a belief in egalitarianism. Later in the film, again in the campus design studio, he is sharply distinguished from Otello who is only interested in market interests and late capitalist initiatives. Here, Otello executively alters the entry, privileging the 'business district' as the only site of 'progress'. Subsequently, in a care-worn square, surrounded by crumbling brick walls and chipped masonry, Iago laments, 'He wants to build a gilded prison where all people do is work ... It's designed to ... turn them into slaves.' Both the faded setting, and the expression of discontent, dramatically mark Iago off from the directions and tendencies of his world.

Inside the film's understanding of Iago as an inventive artist committed to epic and ethical ventures is its discovery of an institutional system averse to mobility and change. Iago's professional ambitions, the film makes clear, are unrealizable. Not only is he passed over as lead on his Faculty's entry to the Biennale event – he is also dictated to, and subordinated by, praxes of privilege that protect the upper echelons. Suggestive in this connection is the way in which, at the public exhibition of their individual projects, the students are rewarded based on familial connections. For example, because she is the Rector's daughter, Desdemona (a student in the Faculty) is given top marks for her 'environmentally friendly' city design: 'excellent work ... 100%', Professor Telli (Pietro De Silva) gushes. His indulgent look, and smiling countenance, are more than enough to demonstrate that the treatment she is accorded is institutionally inflected in her favour.

For his part, Iago's more innovative design, with its emphasis on 'democratic space', access for 'everyone', and 'passageways' linking 'the outskirts to the heart', is questioned and given a mere 'commendation' after qualifying discussion. In fact, in its

[11] Bill Emmott, *Good Italy, Bad Italy: Why Italy Must Conquer Its Demons to Face the Future* (New Haven and London, 2012), pp. 6, 17, 90.

[12] Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents: Family, Civil Society, State, 1980–2001* (London and New York, 2001), p. 32.

[13] Montironi, 'Narrating and unravelling', p. 268; Carlo Celli and Marga Cottino-Jones, *A New Guide to Italian Cinema* (New York, 2007), pp. 154–6.

[14] Andrea Mammone and Giuseppe A. Veltri, 'A "sickman" in Europe', in *Italy Today: The Sick Man of Europe*, ed. Andrea Mammone and Giuseppe A. Veltri (London and New York, 2010), pp. 1–15, esp. p. 2.

anatomization of a system that maintains its own interests, *Iago* gestures towards the practices for which the 'Berlusconi era' has become known, including clientelism, a system of social relations which involves, as John Foot notes, 'an exchange of resources between a patron and a client': these resources may not be 'jobs, or even cash, but can be much more ephemeral "goods" such as trust, the promise of a future "recommendation", or even the banking of such resources for future use'.[15] It is precisely such an arrangement that Brabanzio dangles before Iago when, in the office scene, he assures him patronisingly that 'I recognise your worth . . . I will offer you proper work, my friend.' In situations of 'high unemployment and poverty', when 'resources' are in short supply, clientelism thrives, and the system is inextricably associated with illegality.[16] During the 1990s and 2000s, political corruption was linked to all the major parties in Italy, not least after the 'Clean Hands' (*Mani Pulite*) operation of 1992 uncovered widespread bribery and malpractice.[17] And clientelism and corruption are at the heart of one of the preface's core scenes – the backroom deal between Brabanzio and world-renowned architect, and father of Otello, Philippe Moreau. By a cosy fireside, Brabanzio, referencing 'the contract to build the bridge', states: 'just . . . sign the consultation . . . you're not responsible . . . for the . . . outcome . . . We need to make all [our] friends happy . . . there's a lot of politics.' In reply, Moreau accepts the 'favour', including his son's admission to the Faculty, with discourses of unpalatable business establishing Brabanzio and Moreau as equally enmeshed in shady networks of benefit only to those already in power.

Iago derives ideological impact not just from Iago's institutional marginalization but also from the extent to which this is paralleled in a concomitant romantic disappointment. As several episodes make clear, the wronged hero's tribulations in love echo his frustrations at the profession: one is a microcosm of the other, and Iago, it seems, is good enough for neither. As lover, Iago in the film surrogates for Roderigo in the play, taking on a romantic mantle in penning a love letter to Desdemona, casting her in a fairy-tale light ('She's a sad princess, and I'll rescue her from the tower') and informing his friends that they are destined to be together ('she's my pole-star'). Typically, and matching the film's attachment to Venice's fabled reputation as a city of love, this latter scene takes place in St Mark's Square at night, the camera's lingering on St Mark's Clock Tower, with its golden medieval astrological symbols, lending a visual illustration to his conviction. Quintessentially, Iago meets the expectations of a melancholy lover (as indicated in his black attire) battling against the odds, introducing into the reimagined backstory of *Othello* a class-driven plotline more akin to popular versions of *Romeo and Juliet*. World cinema adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* often understand the play in terms of social divisions that keep the lovers separate, and *Iago* is comparable.[18] The disparity in the worlds that Iago and Desdemona inhabit is self-evident from the start. For instance, with no mother and obliged to live with his aunt, Iago is glimpsed making his way home to a mean apartment in Venice's backstreets: cinematography specifies his route into the 'sestiere de San Paulo' (St Paul district), while establishing shots concentrate on washing hanging between faded buildings, indexes of a working neighbourhood. The apartment itself signals want: the stairwell is dingy, kitschy figurines decorate the walls, and the whole is cramped and constricted. In contradistinction is Desdemona's domestic space. Always in a combination of silky white and sparkly gold, and described by Iago as 'divine' (the soundtrack that introduces her is the song 'So Divine' by Honeybird), Desdemona lives in a lofty, colonnaded palazzo, upward-tilting camerawork indicating her distance from her would-be lover's plebeian circumstances. With its flocked wallpaper, exclusive sidepieces and antique spinning globe, the canal-side palazzo belongs to

[15] Foot, *Italy*, p. 188. [16] Foot, *Italy*, p. 190.

[17] Rosalind Galt, *The New European Cinema: Redrawing the Map* (New York, 2006), p. 48.

[18] Mark Thornton Burnett, *Shakespeare and World Cinema* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 195–231.

a superior universe entirely of its own. Moreover, the fact that the palazzo is accessed via a private gated bridge suggests an enclosed body longed for by, but unavailable to, the love-struck Iago. The two settings could not be more romantically apart. Adding to issues of inaccessibility, and seemingly crystallizing the sense of her remoteness, Desdemona does not respond immediately to Iago's admittedly hesitant approaches, and, when she subsequently falls for Otello's charms, the humiliated student is distraught: 'I'll never love again ... I didn't think it would hurt this much ... I'm drowning', he states, using an appropriate watery metaphor.

It is because Desdemona and Otello belong to similarly elevated environments that, as the film understands it, they are drawn to each other. *Iago* lenses Otello, Black, Paris-based and connected through family to Venice's nepotism, as arrogant and overweening. 'I've spent my life going between Paris, Tokyo and New York', he brags to Desdemona, adding, 'I've studied design systems that even professors couldn't imagine.' A vernacular version of the play's 'round unvarnished tale ... the story of [Othello's] life' (1.3.90, 128), Otello's boasts are delivered against a backdrop of the Rialto Bridge and the Fondaco dei Turchi palazzo, constructs that symbolically affirm the speaker's membership of a modern, mercantile elite. Elsewhere, Otello appears at Roderigo's party as a gladiator (the film's approximation of 'our noble and valiant general' (2.2.1–2)) and in a tailor-made suit sporting a key around his neck (the freedom of the city is his, it is suggested).

In fact, the party concatenates the thematic of an Iago who is overlooked and dispossessed. Nodding to the Capulet ball scene in *William Shakespeare's 'Romeo + Juliet'* (1996) but incorporating more fully *Othello*'s musical militarism ('the shrill trump, / The spirit-stirring drum, th'ear-piercing fife' (3.3.356–7)), *Iago* represents this occasion of excess as the moment at which Iago loses Desdemona to Otello. Taking place in a glittery white palazzo, stocked with ornamental pools, the party, and its masked and costumed partygoers (devils, pirates and emperors), recall Venice's cinematic association with carnival, with a playground of transformation and alternative identities. Yet, for Iago, there is no transformation from his lowly self, the soldierly formations of the dancers drawing attention to his experience of exclusion and loss. The military note is equally emphasized in the ribald remarks of the partygoers ('Bring us the spoils of the enemy') and in the spectacle of a cross-dressed, chain-mailed Roderigo standing in triumph over his male dancer conquest. Contextually, this defining point in Iago's development has its place in the individualistic energies of the era, in what Paul Ginsborg has characterized as contemporary Italy's 'interconnected' imperatives of 'hedonism' and 'consumption'.[19] At the same time, in passages where visuals overtake dialogue, the score approves the direction of travel away from Iago and towards the face-painted warrior Otello as he seduces Desdemona in the library. Hence, the song of inferiority and supplication, 'Beggin'', performed by Madcon, with its haunting complaint, 'I'm on my knees when I'm begging', gives way to the more confidently forthright 'Louxor J'adore', performed by Philippe Katerine, with its motifs of luxury and appeased desire. This is Otello's music, secured through his father's status, and all march to it. With the party, the process of Iago being pushed out, and the filling in of his backstory, are complete. Iago returns home to the depressive notes of Patrick Walton's 'The Great Escape' ('Things are looking down ... eat up all the grey', the lyrics sound), and ascends the stairwell to his aunt's apartment, only to fall asleep, the muted colours of the scene gradually fading to black.

PLAY

The shift away from backstory and towards the Shakespearian text is presented as an awakening, as up-tempo plaintive strings and aggressive trumpets indicate the arrival of the play proper. Shaken into consciousness by his aunt, Iago springs into

[19] Ginsborg, *Italy*, p. 85.

life, suggesting a complement of motivation is now fully in place. Shortly afterwards, sotto voce, Iago announces the first strand of his plan to destroy Otello, his martial metaphors reinforcing the idea of a war between men: 'Otello . . . show me what you're worth on the battlefield.' Visual suggestions – dark bridges and neglected backstreets – are clarified in dialogue, as when Iago confides in Roderigo, 'I won't be honest anymore.' The implication is that Iago now realizes that acting with integrity allows for little movement within a nepotistic network (a change in tactics is demanded). The similarity to the play's opening, and the Shakespearian Iago's confession that 'I know my price . . . Whip me such honest knaves' (1.1.11, 49), advertises the engagement with text even as it registers the transition of the character into an alternative mode. In the light of the film's structuring of narrative and motive, we are sensitized with a particular urgency to the processes through which Iago is newly established as dissembler.

More specifically, and introducing into the film what is only a matter of report in the play, the elopement of Desdemona with Otello for a nocturnal assignation is visualized in a sequence that shows them escaping on a gondola together. The chaos of *Othello*'s opening is duly caught in shots of choppy canal water and distorted shadows, the effect of which is to suggest disturbed psychic states and unsettled vision (buildings and objects merge eerily into their reflections). In addition, the green-filtered tinge that overlays the episode hints both at Otello's jealousy-to-be and, because we see through Iago's gaze, the latter's own professional and personal jealousy. The legitimacy of Iago's vengefulness is intimated in the camera's concentration on his pursed lips and downcast eyes. Later, Iago describes the white handkerchief as 'the green-eyed monster coming crawling to my aid', going on, 'Jealousy . . . Soon someone else will taste what I have been feeding on.' The consumptive metaphor implies not only how far Iago is himself consumed by jealousy, but also his desire for another to suffer with a similarly debilitating experience.

Martin Orkin and Alexa Alice Joubin note that, in *Othello*, 'modes of racial hatred' are conveyed in 'manifestly offensive utterances [that] . . . reiterate . . . traditional fears of miscegenation, allegations of sexual excess, perversion, bestiality and imaginings of "black barbarity"'.[20] Such associations are encapsulated in the 'sign' of the 'Sagittary' (1.1.159–60), the fictive inn at which Othello and Desdemona meet – emblazoned, as it is, with the mark of the centaur, a mythological beast suggestive of the 'Barbary horse' (1.1.113–14) and an intermingled racial and sexual history. By contrast, in *Iago*, while echoes of the Shakespearian 'sign' are hinted at in Roderigo's reference to the 'Calle Moro' ('Moor Street'), racist slurs do not otherwise intrude.[21] The adaptive procedure is to replace the play's racial subtexts with terms of sexual shame. 'How does it feel to be a cuckolded father?', Roderigo taunts from the street adjoining Brabanzio's palazzo, adding, 'All Venice is laughing about it . . . [Desdemona's] making a spectacle of herself and your good name.' As the dialogue makes clear, the stress here is on social embarrassment. Typical, then, is the way in which Brabanzio chides his daughter when she returns home: 'Think of the neighbours . . . the humiliation', he obsesses. As an integral part of its adaptive approach, *Iago* distances itself from the most objectionable elements of its source, playing up the contemporary and ensuring for Iago unambiguous audience engagement. We see the process at work again during the rousing of Brabanzio when a silent Iago watches from the sidelines (he is differentiated here from the verbally abusive 'ensign' (1.1.32) of the play) while a cloaked, bewigged and sunglasses-wearing Roderigo does the necessary work. *Othello*, of course, envisions Roderigo as a duped innocent, but, in a further reorientation of identification, *Iago* represents him as co-conspiring with Iago because he believes in his fellow student's cause. The

[20] Martin Orkin with Alexa Alice Joubin, *Race* (London and New York, 2019), pp. 39, 41.

[21] See Susie Boulton and Christopher Catling, *Eyewitness Travel: Venice & the Veneto* (London and New York, 2016), p. 299.

adjustment builds on the premises of the preface and makes clear that Iago's desire for revenge is supported, and is supportable.

If Iago is stripped of racism, he is simultaneously purged of misogyny. The play shows us Iago delighting in riling Cassio via a provocatively sexualized construction of Desdemona ('I'll warrant her full of game' (2.3.199)), but, in *Iago*, Desdemona is removed as the inflammatory reference-point. At a bar in a picturesque night-time square, sexual accusations pass instead between Cassio and Roderigo, the latter, theatrically exploiting his gay persona, having been primed to infuriate the former by challenging his masculinity. Once again, it is noticeable that Iago does not participate in the exchange of homophobic and ego-enraging insults ('a flute to play ... behind us' and 'Cassio-Dick here'). The resulting violence is ramped up by the stomping rhythms of the score ('Ces bottes sont fait pour marcher'), the theme of which is made manifest in the camera's focus on Iago stealing Cassio's compact disc (the only record of his work towards the Biennale event) and replacing it with a broken substitute. As a downward tilt reveals the shattered shards of the disc and a tangle of destructive feet, Cassio's fate, it seems, is sealed. 'You're out', explodes an irate Otello, who has witnessed the event and dispassionately rejects his assistant's excuses.

The compact disc is but one of the film's charged – and jealousy-producing – properties. In one of the few discussions of the film, Sujata Iyengar notes that *Iago* 'distributes the handkerchief's function among several items: a Polaroid snapshot of Desdemona and Cassio kissing, taken by Iago in a ... more innocent time ... a lace handkerchief ... stolen by Emilia and planted in Cassio's bed; and the compact disc'.[22] Circulating and splitting in this manner, *Iago* makes the gulling of Otello/Othello particularly persuasive, removing what is often a credibility sticking-point in production. As the film understands it, Otello is tricked at multiple levels, steered into insecurity by Desdemona's urgings ('Call Cassio'), her intemperance and the sight of her and Cassio together. Among the various properties utilized in his intrigue, Cassio's card-index box of sexual conquests, into which Iago has planted the Polaroid snapshot, looms large. 'Accidentally' coming across the fatal image, but claiming that it amounts to 'nothing', Iago finds his rival more than susceptible to suggestion. 'Nothing? Why were you trying to hide it?' Otello questions. Here, the card-index box works as the filmic equivalent to the play's metaphor of the 'brain' that houses a 'monster' (3.3.118, 111), and the result is an exasperated and disempowered Otello ('What does it mean?' he demands).

Possibly Iyengar underestimates the extent to which the handkerchief in *Iago* remains significant. Notably, Desdemona, lent Othello's words from the play, speaks of 'a family heirloom ... made of silk': in this formulation, she is given the responsibility of explaining the handkerchief, and its history, to the filmic audience. Unlike her more careless dramatic counterpart, *Iago*'s Desdemona is represented as aware of the meanings of the 'present' she has been gifted and conscious of what might be involved in its loss. We, too, are made conscious of the handkerchief's symbolic power and thus of the devastating potential of its going astray. In fact, when we arrive at the anticipated seduction/subordination of Otello by Iago (the structurally linked scenes of 3.3 and 4.1), it is no surprise to see how the world-renowned architect's son is already in his fellow student's thrall. In that it has been well prepared for, the shift in the power balance is psychologically persuasive. Immediately after the gulling of Cassio, Iago is applauded by Roderigo as a 'genio' ('genius'), an appellation that testifies to his growing hold over the action. Revealingly, it is shortly before this accolade that Iago breaks the third wall and stares insolently into camera. Surrogating for the play's soliloquies, the wordless close-up both meta-cinematically announces Iago's mastery and complements the film's meta-theatrical language. Looking through stairwells at the effect of his stratagems, for instance, Iago observes, 'I'm drafting Otello's part as well',

[22] Iyengar, 'Beds, handkerchiefs, and moving objects', p. 31.

his disclosure confirming his combined designer and director role.

Indeed, in the representation of Iago's intrigue, the film is able to rehearse the key set-pieces of the play at breakneck speed, including the attempted rehabilitation of Cassio ('He's already caused enough trouble', a piqued Otello notes) and Otello's quizzing Desdemona about her movements. These ensue in such rapid succession that Iago's grasp of the plot's entanglements seems unassailable. Interestingly, via these episodes, we are reminded of how structurally entrenched corruption and clientelism have become in the Venetian university. Thus, in relation to the Faculty entry, Iago assures Otello, 'I'll have a look at your part ... then you finish it', an offer that allows him to mimic Brabanzio's earlier advice. 'Make a show of friendship', Iago counsels Otello about Cassio, adding, 'Leaders need to play at politics.' It is as if Iago, now in the position of patron, is turning systems of favouritism and obligation to his own advantage. Typically, the film's realization of the linked scenes of 3.3 and 4.1 is split between two Venetian locales. One moment Otello and Iago look down on Desdemona crossing a bridge from a lofty rooftop with a vista over towers and steeples. In terms of point of view, and aided by blocking that foregrounds his gesturing, it is Iago's narrative perspective that dominates. The next moment, Iago and Otello confer in the latter's apartment, complete with antique prints, leather sofas and fashion-conscious accessories. The sumptuous *Elle Decor Italia* magazine interiors notwithstanding, a sense of Otello's entrapment now obtains, as suggested in the ornate grilles at the windows and the room's rising verticals. Yet, despite the increase in his manipulative stature, Iago remains during these scenes the unhappy outsider. For example, pausing on a romantic bridge that gives onto a Renaissance church's busy façade, Iago informs Desdemona, 'Somebody like me has to work twice as hard to get results', his comment operating to prioritize the continuing realities of class and its excluding effects.

Of course, the issue of who is excluded, and why, is central to *Othello*. Both the dark palette of the play phase of the film, and possibly Iago's apprehension that 'people' in Otello's iteration of the city are akin to 'slaves', invite us to think more about how *Iago* negotiates the play's racial subtexts. Ayanna Thompson reminds us that 'race-making' takes on different forms at 'different historical moments to create structural and material inequalities', and her comment is useful in sensitizing us to specific articulations of race in the Italy of the early twenty-first century.[23] Perhaps because Italy's modern imperial history was relatively brief (constituted by a period of colonial occupation in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya and Somalia that came to a close with the fall of Benito Mussolini's fascist rule), debate about categories of Italian citizenship and nationhood have raged in recent decades.[24] In particular, the arrival in Italy of Arab and North African migrants – or *extracomunitari* as they are nicknamed – has been accompanied, as Vanessa Maher explains, by an outburst of 'racist and xenophobic reactions' and anti-immigration legislation.[25] An immigration law was passed in 2002; in 2008, as part of his electoral campaign, Berlusconi addressed issues around Roma and Sinti immigration in terms of national security; and in 2009, the immigration law was reinstated and reinforced.[26] Even if it aims to dissociate itself from such developments, as refracted in its attempted cleansing of the play's racist utterances, *Iago* finds it impossible to escape the pressure of its racist contexts entirely. Crucially, both

[23] Ayanna Thompson, 'Did the concept of race exist for Shakespeare and his contemporaries? An introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Ayanna Thompson (Cambridge, 2021), pp. 1–16, esp. p. 7.

[24] Sante Matteo, 'African Italy, bridging continents and cultures', in *ItaliAfrica: Bridging Continents and Cultures*, ed. Sante Matteo (Stony Brook, 2001), pp. 1–22, esp. p. 6.

[25] Vanessa Maher, 'Immigration and social identities', in *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, ed. David Forgacs and Robert Lumley (Oxford, 1996), pp. 160–77, esp. p. 163.

[26] Montironi, 'Narrating and unravelling', p. 269; Nando Sigona, '"Gypsies out of Italy!": social exclusion and racial discrimination of Roma and Sinti in Italy', in *Italy Today: The Sick Man of Europe*, ed. Mammone and Veltri, pp. 143–57, esp. p. 150.

contemporaneous projections, and colonial legacies, find release in Cassio, Otello's cousin, his character functioning as the site where some of the most unpalatable aspects of the 'Berlusconi era' meet. As well as to homophobia, Cassio gives vent to frustrations that cluster around the Otello figure. '[Otello has] put me in a real mess . . . My father made it quite clear: no Biennale, no masters in Tokyo . . . No Tokyo, no Japanese girls . . . Have you ever screwed a J*p? [It's] all thanks to that s****y n****r!', he rages. Delivered in his swanky apartment, Cassio's comments continue the narrative of privilege, linking a conviction of entitlement to sexualized assumptions about Asian women and toxic masculinity. In addition, because Cassio is shot here against a backdrop of a poster of a cartoon character from the 1940s and 1950s, Gim Toro, he is tied to constructs of Italy's regressive attitudes. The poster shows a jungle scene in which the stripy topped hero battles tigers as a young Asian woman looks on admiringly.[27] Such is the effect of the juxtaposition that we are invited to see in Cassio a contemporary – and masculinized – expression of Italy's imperial past. Some of *Iago*'s repurposing manoeuvres are underlined here – for Iago to be empathetic, Cassio must be objectionable. The worse the latter appears, the better the former is presented – Iago appearing through comparison as more future-oriented and progressively attuned.

Yet discourses of toxicity are not easily dislodged. At the close of the play phase of *Iago*, the bloodbath of *Othello* is avoided, and no deaths occur. Aggressivity and upset remain as norms as an enraged Otello assaults a furious Cassio and then tears upstairs to the design studio to strike Desdemona and berate her for her presumed infidelities: 'That bitch!', he exclaims. In this way, the key moments of the intrigue are recalled in violent combinations: Iago's question ('The truth – is that what you want?') brings us back to his earlier renunciation of 'honesty', while Cassio's realization ('Can't you see he's playing us off against each other?') is the tipping-point that precipitates the student's exposure. The spectacle of Otello wrecking the model, and dashing thereby the team's Biennale chances, is a climactic moment. Idealism dissolves as does the construct of a world in which 'people' come together for a common purpose in a level environment. In this concluding scenario, the destructive direction of *Othello* is reconceived, the central players crushed but remaining, and the consequences of Iago's intrigue still to be fully played out.

ADDITIONAL ACT

In contradistinction to the play, the film delivers on the expectation that Iago will explain himself, reversing centuries of performative silence and concatenating the representation of a type whose behaviours have been contextualized from the start. Against the backdrop of the smashed-up studio, Iago makes his frustrations crystal clear. Addressing Otello, he exclaims, 'You . . . you're not . . . capable of managing a project. Weren't you the first to jump at using my work so you didn't look bad? . . . A name's not enough to give you talent!' Turning then to Brabanzio, Iago excoriates the Rector for putting 'friends and . . . business' above all else and ignoring 'merit', continuing, 'Without people like you, the world would be a better place and people like me wouldn't have to fight to survive!' Via this rush of eloquence, the film's intersecting motifs of meritocracy, clientelism and corruption, and the compulsion to revenge, are sited at centre stage. In reply, Brabanzio, who has been called on to intervene in the affray, is incredulous, labelling the student a 'terrorist'. The term underlines his perception of an unacceptable 'politics' mobilized in the espousal of a cause, and situates Iago wholly outside the system he has consistently chafed against. Adding salt to the wound, Desdemona slaps Iago and storms out of the studio, the suggestion being that he is now multiply rejected.

However, by elaborating an additional act, *Iago* pushes through and eventually transforms the

[27] The poster reproduces the cover of the 12-page issue 63 of *Gim Toro, La divoratrice d'uomini / The Man Eater* (1947).

implications of Desdemona's response. Important here is the provision of a Desdemona–Emilia exchange which complicates the male-on-male dynamic of the adaptation as a whole. True to her Shakespearian counterpart's function as a voice of reprimand and reason in 4.2 and 5.1, Emilia, once the disorder has dissipated, remonstrates with Desdemona in the campus square: 'You knew Iago was dying of love for you . . . you humiliated him . . . [and] didn't think twice about defending those old school-ties boys . . . Come down from your tower', she berates. Picking up on the earlier reference to Desdemona's fairy-tale inaccessibility, Emilia's gendered critique highlights the role of women in a network in which men predominate. Listening to Emilia's words, Desdemona is obliged to confront her own responsibilities. The Rector's daughter, it is implied, is complicit, and in such a way that the nepotism so vital to clientelism and corruption is sustained and enabled.

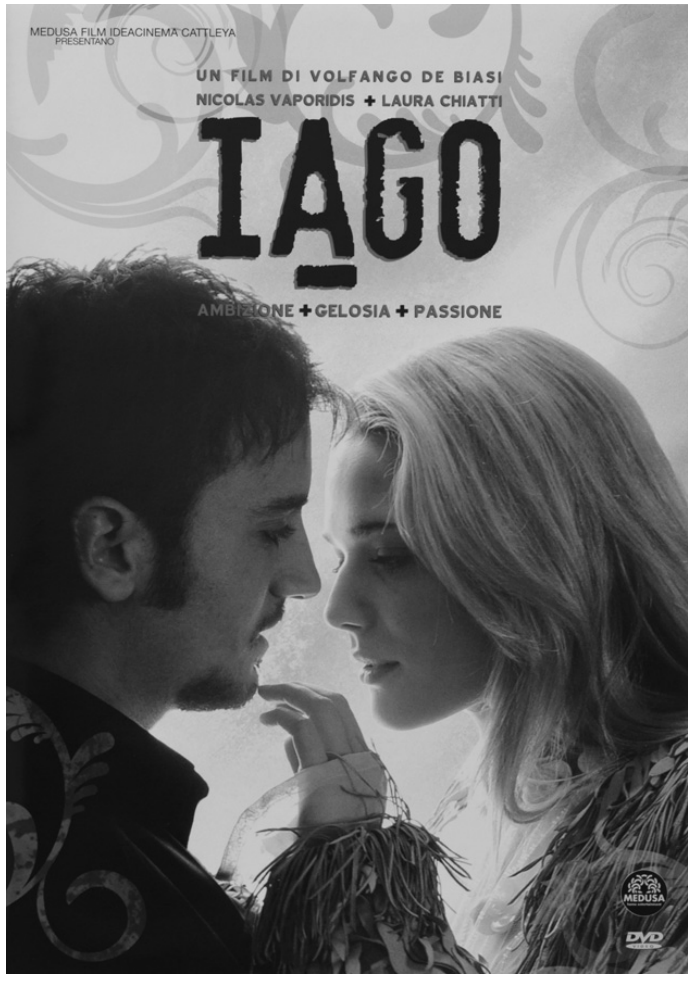
Reflecting on the end of *Othello* and stage properties, Robert C. Evans notes the 'bed that plays such a prominent role', in a reading that is expanded on by Lynda E. Boose when she singles out 'the imagined chamber . . . [the] forbidden space which [the play] has repeatedly eroticised'.[28] In each of its three phases – preface, play, additional act – *Iago* interpolates the wronged hero's bedroom. With preface and play, the bedroom features to signify Iago's removal from a world of privilege. As the high point of the additional act, however, the movement is reversed: Desdemona leaves her world to enter Iago's (see Figure 2). She seeks him out in his own *sestiere*, her displacement rounding off the film's domestic trajectory. The emphasis on Iago's bedroom as the destination-point of the film recalls the ways in which, in *Othello*, 'prurient descriptions' and 'viewer gratification' consort in a form of early modern 'pornography'.[29] 'You're arrogant and conceited . . . Destroying everything around you . . . You've destroyed my father . . . destroyed my relationship . . . destroyed Otello', Desdemona upbraids. Yet her condemnation quickly gives way to invitation, as, sitting on the bed and revealing herself to be only partially dressed, she states: 'I want to be with an important man . . . Take me, you've won, promise me you'll always love me like this.'

There is much that is unpalatable here, including the representation of Desdemona's submissiveness and the sense of a defeat that amounts to sexual victory. But winning Desdemona means that Iago emerges triumphant, and this is underlined in an interpolated sequence showing Brabanzio much reduced – bumbling and clumsy, he hesitates on his stairwell: 'My God, where am I going?' In losing his way – and his place as a controlling *paterfamilias* – Brabanzio simultaneously rescinds institutional authority. By contrast, the bedroom motif of a cross-class couple underscores the future promise of the meritocratic city; the values to which Iago still subscribes, it is implied, will democratize the older order. As a reflection of the alteration in mood, the episode is overlaid with an upbeat pop soundtrack: the lyrics to 'Love is noise' by The Verve accentuate being 'saved' by 'righteous anger', living in the 'city', and working as 'one'. As the consummation becomes the culmination of *Iago*'s story, the embracing pair is discreetly – theatrically – veiled. The film's ultimate shot – a bright red superimposed curtain being draped over the spectacle of the lovers – self-consciously evokes Lodovico's reference in *Othello* to the 'loading of this bed' (5.2.373) and his demand that the curtains be drawn. At this climactic moment, however, the curtains fall not on tragedy but on a scene of sexual intimacy and romantic commitment which signals a new beginning.

The hopefulness of this ending continues in a series of tongue-in-cheek inserts interspersed over the credits. The final one of these – in a playful nod – returns us to Shakespeare's titular hero. Otello is discovered on a bench looking despairing – for the

[28] Robert C. Evans, 'Introduction', in *'Othello': A Critical Reader*, ed. Robert C. Evans (London and New York, 2015), pp. 1–14, esp. p. 9; Lynda E. Boose, '"Let it be hid": the pornographic aesthetic of Shakespeare's *Othello*', in *'Othello': Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Lena Cowen Orlin (Basingstoke, 2004), pp. 22–48, esp. p. 22.

[29] Boose, '"Let it be hid"', pp. 26, 27, 35.



2 The DVD cover of *Iago* (dir. Volfango di Biasi, 2009) shows Iago (Nicolas Vaporidis) and Desdemona (Laura Chiatti) locked in an exploratory embrace. Medusa Film / author collection.

first time he is imagined as the archetypally rendered Othello defined by 'fragmented … orientations' who is 'culturally adrift, alienated and alone'.[30] The inset reminds us that clientelism, and its corruptive consequences, harm even those who benefit materially from it. 'I'm a loser, a failure, a fake', Otello moans, but his depressive introspection is immediately challenged by a passing Roderigo.[31] 'What do you mean?', Roderigo asks him, 'You're a bright guy, full of talent … You're the best … Would

[30] Carol Mejia LaPerle, 'Race in Shakespeare's tragedies', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Ayanna Thompson (Cambridge, 2021), pp. 77–92, esp. p. 89; Ian Smith, 'We are Othello: speaking of race in early modern studies', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67 (2016), 104–24; p. 112.

[31] His despondency, we realize, is the result of the dressing down he has received earlier at Brabanzio's hands, in a scene that approximates even as it brings forward Othello's being called to account for his actions before the Venetian senators.

you like to come to my place for dinner?' Catherine O'Rawe argues that some recent Italian films examining migration represent 'bonds of affection … between male migrants and Italians' and 'continue the homosocial thematic' for which 'Italian cinema' is known.[32] Certainly, as Otello eagerly responds to Roderigo's invitation, ideas of connectivity – if not hospitality and welcome – are foregrounded. The positives of such a discovery of the character never prioritized in *Iago* are reflected in the iconic image of Venice which is now introduced. As the camera switches to reveal Otello and Roderigo seated on the bench together, we move into a wide shot of the magnificent façade of the Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute, with its breath-taking vista across the Grand Canal towards St Mark's Square. It is the picture-postcard view of Venice for which we have waited, affirming that, for the reformed Otello, Venice, available and authenticated, now properly opens its doors. Incorporating Shakespeare's tragic hero within a millennial generation defined by same-sex attraction, the film concludes with a fantasy of the possibilities of meritocracy in a contemporary, cosmopolitan and youthful Venice, one that is alive to the prospect of fresh opportunities presenting themselves and further stories evolving.

[32] Catherine O'Rawe, 'Contemporary cinema', in *Directory of World Cinema: Italy*, ed. Louis Bayman (Bristol, 2011), pp. 255–6, esp. p. 256. In this connection, *Iago* bears brief comparison with *Sud side stori* ('South Side Story'), the Italian adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* which, Maurizio Calbi argues, 'brings an allegorical dimension to bear on the issues of migration and hospitality it continually foregrounds' (Calbi, *Spectral Shakespeares*, p. 82).

CIRCUMVENTING MARGINALITY: THE CURIOUS CASE OF INDIA'S *OTHELLO* SCREEN ADAPTATIONS

ABHIRUP MASCHARAK

Nearly an hour into B. R. Chopra's *Hamraaz* ('Confidant', 1967), Kumar, the protagonist, starts suspecting his wife, Meena, of infidelity. That his suspicions are incorrect is something that the film clarifies only later. But it hints at the unjust nature of his misgivings at the very moment that they start taking root in his mind by having him, a theatre actor, perform in the title role of *Othello*. Notably, the scenes we see him act in include those of Iago manipulating Othello with claims of Desdemona's supposed adultery, and Othello's subsequent murder of Desdemona. Kumar, distraught over the possibility of Meena's unfaithfulness, lets his anger seep into his performance, so much so that he almost kills Shabnam, his co-star playing Desdemona, during the enactment of *Othello*'s climax. Later, when he intercepts what he thinks is a love-letter to Meena from her lover, Kumar leaves his residence on the pretext of going to Poona, but actually loiters around the house in disguise, hoping to catch Meena and her paramour in the act. His disguise consists of a false beard and a black coat, which resembles the bearded look he had sported and the dark robes he had worn while playing Othello. As he waits outside his house, an unknown killer shoots Meena dead, and Kumar, upon seeing her corpse, is devastated not only by her death, but also by the realization that, had he remained *in* the house with his wife, he could have protected her. As he weeps and calls himself Meena's 'kaatil' ('murderer'), one is reminded of Othello's lament in the aftermath of his murder of Desdemona: 'Whip me, ye devils, / From the possession of this heavenly sight. / Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur, / Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire! / O, Desdemon! Dead Desdemon! Dead! O! O!' (*Othello*, 5.2.284–8)

A similar invocation of *Othello* occurs in Vinay Shukla's *Mirch* ('Spice', 2010), an anthology film in which an aspiring filmmaker narrates to a potential financier a script that consists of four humorously erotic stories. The third of these stories is about Manjul, a young husband, who grows doubtful of his wife Manjula's loyalty, and approaches a friend for help. This friend, who works in a theatre and thinks Manjul is being unnecessarily paranoid, tries to reason with him, and when Manjul keeps insisting that he needs to know for sure whether his wife has been unfaithful, the friend looks at him and asks, pointedly, 'You have read *Othello*, haven't you?'

Neither of these films is an adaptation of *Othello*, at least not in any traditional sense. *Mirch*'s association with the play is restricted to that one reference, while *Hamraaz* invokes *Othello* only to underscore the extent of Kumar's jealousy; the main plot, which charts Kumar's search for Meena's killer while outrunning the policeman who considers Kumar the murderer, does not have anything to do with Shakespeare's play. Both films, however, are relevant to any study of Indian cinema's treatment of this particular play, as the films' invocation of *Othello* is symptomatic of how Indian filmmakers, across generations, have looked upon it: as just a domestic drama revolving around love, betrayal and jealousy. The issue of

Othello's race and/or the marginality to which it relegates him have rarely found any insightful, sustained exploration in the Indian films which draw upon the play, whether one looks at loose appropriations such as Ajoy Kar's *Saptapadi* ('The Seven Steps', 1961) and T. Prakash Rao's *Izzat* ('Honour', 1968), or more faithful/traditional adaptations such as Jayaraj's *Kaliyattam* ('The Play of God', 1997) and Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara* (2006). Even as these films touch upon the topics of the differences of race, religion and caste, they ultimately generate drama not by exploring those differences, but by trying to have the viewers emotionally invested in the outcome of the romance at the centre of these films. The personal in these films, that is to say, never becomes the political.

In this article, I wish to study the *Othello* adaptations mentioned in the previous paragraph in detail, in order to determine the cause behind this persistent avoidance of the issue of marginality that is so central to the play. To do so, I have employed what Karen Kline, in her taxonomy of the paradigms under which screen adaptations may be studied, calls the Materialist paradigm, an approach whereby an adaptation is viewed not in terms of its fidelity (or lack thereof) to its literary source, but vis-à-vis the circumstances under which it was produced. Those adopting this paradigm in their study of a film adaptation consider it, as Kline puts it, a product of both 'cultural-historical processes' (that is, the socio-political zeitgeist of the time and place it was made in) and 'the extratextual forces operating within the production process' of the film (such as what genres of films were in vogue during the particular period and in the particular film industry producing the adaptation, the penchant of its director or screenwriter towards making films of a specific variety, the onscreen persona of its lead actors, and so on).[1] Since these Indian *Othello* adaptations have been made in different languages, by different directors and in different periods, the tendency to sidestep the matter of Othello's marginality, while common to all the films, was likely the outcome of not a single, overarching reason, but of causes specific to each film. The Materialist paradigm, therefore, is best suited to understand those causes, since it allows for a case-by-case study of the conditions – social, cultural and political – under which they were made, and which had likely contributed to the avoidance of the issue of marginality in each of these films.

I begin the study with the Hindi-language *Omkara*, since it is the most well known of the Indian screen adaptations of *Othello*. Set in the hinterlands of Uttar Pradesh, it recasts the Moor of Venice as Omkara Shukla, the right-hand man of Tiwari, a powerful gangster-turned-politician. When Omkara selects his aide Keshav, or Kesu, as his deputy, Omkara's other aide, Ishwar Tyagi (called 'Langda', or 'lame', by others because he walks with a limp), becomes livid, and plots against Omkara by sowing in his mind the suspicion that Kesu and Dolly Mishra, Omkara's paramour, are having a dalliance. Plot-wise, the film is largely faithful to the play, and its dialogues correspond, mostly, to Shakespeare's lines. This fidelity extends, at first glance, to Omkara's characterization. His father, we learn, was a Brahmin, but his mother was a woman from a so-called 'lower caste'. This mixed parentage is obviously part of the endeavour to make Omkara an Other/outsider, as is the casting of Ajay Devgn, an actor with a darker complexion than most leading men in Hindi cinema, as Omkara. The makers even dress Devgn, frequently, in black clothes and make him wear dark sunglasses, as if to make sure he looks 'darker' and stands out among his more light-skinned co-stars, much as Othello stands out as the solitary Black man in the otherwise white Venetian society.

The trouble, however, is that the film shows little of the ramifications of either Omkara's caste or his complexion. Shakespeare never lets us forget Othello's vulnerability as an ethnic Other even as we learn that he is a respected general for the Duke of Venice. When other characters are not speaking

[1] Karen Kline, '*The Accidental Tourist* on page and on screen: interrogating normative theories about film adaptation', *Literature/Film Quarterly* 24 (1996), 70–83; p. 74.

of him in a language replete with racial slurs ('Thick-lips' (*Othello*, 1.1.66), 'black ram' (1.1.88), 'Barbary horse' (1.1.113–14), 'sooty bosom' (1.2.71)) or reviling his looks as hideous (as Brabantio does in act 1, scene 2), they refer to him, constantly, as 'the Moor'. While that term is not always uttered pejoratively in the play, its repeated usage does draw our attention to Othello's racial difference from other Venetians. Establishing that difference is important, because that alone explains why Iago is able to manipulate Othello into turning against Desdemona. Othello has had to fight hard to achieve the stature he currently enjoys among Venetians. It is only after enduring enslavement and endangering his life, often in battles for Venice in various parts of the world, that he has gained respect. Yet, while the people around him appreciate the service that Othello has rendered to Venice, they hardly seem to view him as their equal, as Brabantio's outrage over Othello and Desdemona's marriage demonstrates: one would not be wrong in assuming that other white Venetians would have reacted similarly had Othello married any of their daughters. In other words, Othello, despite his respectable standing as a general, is made aware, in the form of Brabantio's prejudiced tirades, that he is not deemed fit to marry into a white Venetian family – that all that he has done for Venice as a military commander is not enough for people to overlook his racial identity. So, when Iago suggests that Desdemona is attracted to Cassio, who is not just white but also younger and conventionally handsome, one understands why Othello would believe this to be true. His insecurities over his race and looks and age, insecurities which the society he inhabits has hammered into him, make him conclude that Desdemona, having got over her initial infatuation with him, has, as Iago puts it, drifted towards a man 'of her own clime, complexion and degree' (*Othello*, 3.3.235). His lament that Desdemona has turned disloyal to him because 'Haply, for I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have' serves as evidence of these insecurities (3.3.267–9).

Omkara locates no such insecurity in its titular character, whose position as a powerful, dreaded mobster is threatened in no discernible way by his caste or colour. The film, as a matter of fact, is not even interested in making Omkara as much of an outsider as Othello is. The latter, one must note, is not born of the union between a Black and a white parent; he is, as a Moor, a complete racial Other. Omkara, on the other hand, does not belong fully to the so-called 'lower caste', as one of his parents is Brahmin. Significantly, that parent is his father rather than his mother. Since Indian society decrees that children will carry the surnames, and hence the caste and religious identities, of their fathers, Omkara can successfully downplay his 'half-caste' status, using the surname (Shukla) of his Brahmin father, wearing the so-called 'sacred thread' of the Brahmins around his neck, and performing rituals inside Hindu shrines alongside Brahmins. The other Brahmins around him – Tiwari, Kesu, Dolly, even Tyagi – never seem to view him as inferior to them, and, on the rare occasion when they do refer to his mixed parentage, they call him 'aadha Brahman' ('half Brahmin'), thereby identifying him in terms of his link to the dominant caste rather than the so-called 'lower' one to which his mother belonged. Dolly endorses this perception of Omkara when she says, in reply to Omkara describing himself as partially Brahmin, 'A half-moon is still a moon'; as a Brahmin herself, she believes that being a Brahmin man's son is reason enough to consider Omkara a Brahmin as well. Having a Brahmin father, then, goes a long way in letting Omkara into the upper echelon of the caste hierarchy, and wins him privileges Othello never enjoys. Even the occasional insult Omkara endures for having a so-called 'low-caste' mother serves to show his comparative privilege rather than render him an outsider. Dolly's father, a Brahmin, chastises Omkara for eloping with his daughter by linking his behaviour to his mother: 'I forgot that you are only partly Brahmin; your mother is that bloody low-caste woman.' His choice of words ought to give us pause: how, despite his knowledge of Omkara's parentage, could Dolly's father 'forget' that Omkara is not fully a Brahmin? Similarly, why

does he, while enumerating to Tiwari his reasons behind his objection to Omkara and Dolly's relationship, refer first to Omkara being a 'jahil gunda' ('uncouth goon'), then a 'daitya' ('demon') and only then as 'jaat ka aadha' ('half-caste'), indicating that he is repelled more by Omkara's association with the world of crime and murder than by his mixed-caste status? The answer, presumably, is that, as the son of a Shukla, the favoured protégé of a Tiwari – the chief to Brahmins such as Tyagi and Kesu – and now the paramour of a Brahmin girl like Dolly, Omkara is, for all practical purposes, a Brahmin himself, and Dolly's father knows as much. His insulting comment on Omkara's mother is little more than a futile display of anger, caused more by his daughter's disobedience than anything else, which is why Omkara shrugs off the remark with a disdainful smile. As Saksham Sharda says:

> The question that we are consequently faced with is whether it is impossible for the director Vishal Bhardwaj even fictionally to construct a credible situation in which a Brahmin woman marries an outcaste in contemporary India. For the tale of *Othello*, it could be argued, is not analogous to 'near-black half-Brahmin' Omkara marrying a 'near-white Brahmin' woman like Dolly. Far from it: the tale of *Othello* is the untold story of Omkara's father (a pure Brahmin) marrying a *kanjar* woman . . . a story from which *Omkara* consciously shies away.[2]

His dark complexion similarly poses little challenge to his power. When Indu, the counterpart of Emilia in the film, sees Omkara and Dolly together for the first time, she makes fun of the contrast between his swarthiness and her much lighter skin tone. Her words, however, are part of the good-natured, playful banter between her and Omkara (whom she considers her brother), rather than the equivalent of the racist slurs hurled at Othello by Iago and Brabantio. Indeed, she caps off her jokes by comparing Omkara to Krishna, the dark-skinned Hindu god, and 'Omkara', it may be noted, is one of the many names of Shiva, another Hindu deity. These references to divinity are fitting because, in terms of the power he wields, Omkara may well be regarded as a god vis-à-vis the people he lords it over.

This begs the question: what makes Omkara susceptible to Tyagi's machinations? If he is this powerful, and if his caste or looks pose as little a threat to his authority as the film would have us believe, then what sense of insecurity could possibly have left him vulnerable to the lies Tyagi peddles? The film never quite manages to answer these questions. Poonam Trivedi suggests that differences of class, rather than caste, have contributed to Omkara's suspicions.[3] Unlike him, Dolly and Kesu are college-educated and can speak in English. They belong, or can be seen as belonging, to a more elite, sophisticated section of the society, where Omkara, for all his might, would be a misfit. But even this possibility receives no convincing portrayal in the film. Kesu may have been dubbed 'firangi' (a Hindi term for white foreigners) by some because of his knowledge of the English language, but he is no upper-class man. He belongs, squarely, to the same milieu as Omkara and Tyagi. He is seen, mostly, in the same dusty, quasi-rural settings as them; speaks, mostly, in the same Hindi dialect as they do; and does the same job (henchman for Tiwari). Furthermore, in his exchanges with Kesu, Omkara never shows any hint of feeling intimidated by the latter's 'Englishness'. Indeed, he seems to hold the ability to converse in English in no special regard; when Dolly sings an English song for him, Omkara, far from being awed, bursts out laughing at her off-key rendition. There appears to be no significant age-gap between him and Dolly either, and in those moments when Omkara is shirtless, he displays a muscular, toned, conventionally attractive physique that belies the possibility that he could be regarded as 'ugly' in the way that Othello is. In the light of these facts, the only explanation for Tyagi's success in manipulating Omkara is that the latter is just pathologically jealous by nature.

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[2] Saksham Sharda, 'Black skin, black castes: overcoming a fidelity discourse in Bhardwaj's *Omkara*', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 35 (2017), 599–626; p. 617.

[3] Poonam Trivedi, 'Remaking Shakespeare in India: Vishal Bhardwaj's films', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge, 2020), p. 242.

But should one settle for that explanation – and one probably must, seeing that Bhardwaj himself has said of his film, 'We're focusing on the jealousy more than racism'[4] – then Omkara can hardly be considered a marginal figure, and the mentions in the film of his caste and complexion make him only perfunctorily similar to Othello.

This disinterest on the part of *Omkara* in portraying its central character as marginal in any genuine sense can probably be attributed to Bhardwaj's decision to retell *Othello* as a gangster saga. The film, in fact, may be seen as part of a slew of gangster films birthed by a newfound interest in the genre in the Hindi film industry during the late 1990s, possibly in response to the 1993 bomb blasts in Mumbai (where the industry is located) that turned out to be the handiwork of the gangster Dawood Ibrahim. Dilip Shankar's *Aatank hi Aatank* ('Reign of Terror', 1995) and Sudhir Mishra's *Is Raat Ki Subah Nahin* ('This Endless Night', 1996) are early examples of this interest. But it was with the release of Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya* (1998), considered a landmark in Hindi cinema because of its gritty, realistic portrayal of gangsterism, that underworld sagas became a frequent phenomenon in Hindi films, with Varma's *Company* (2001) and *Sarkar* ('Overlord', 2005), Vishram Sawant's *D* (2005), Vinay Shukla's *Godmother* (1999), Mahesh Manjrekar's *Vaastav* ('The Reality', 1999) and *Hathyar* ('Weapon', 2002) and Anurag Kashyap's *Black Friday* (2004) releasing in quick succession, and swelling the hitherto impoverished ranks of Hindi gangster cinema. This interest in gangster stories remained consistent till about 2012, when Kashyap's *Gangs of Wasseypur*, a sprawling mafia epic, was released; since then, interest in the genre seems to have petered out. Bhardwaj, who had been the music composer for *Satya* and *Godmother*, was evidently influenced by this trend, which explains why *Maqbool* (2003), his adaptation of *Macbeth*, is set in the underworld. The critical acclaim the film received had likely convinced him to retell *Othello* against a similar backdrop. But the decision to turn Shakespeare's characters into gangsters has the unfortunate outcome of robbing his stories of their tragic facet. *Macbeth* and *Othello* are tragedies not just because the protagonists die in the end, but because they are upright, noble individuals who go astray, partly owing to flaws of their own (ambition in the case of Macbeth, a degree of gullibility in the case of Othello), and partly because of others' machinations (Lady Macbeth, Iago). The titular characters in *Maqbool* and *Omkara*, on the other hand, are already criminals, gangsters who kill and coerce others for a living. So, when they commit further murders, it is not a case of good men turning bad, but of bad men turning worse.

In the case of *Omkara*, the gangster story format similarly gets in the way of exploring marginality. Gangster films are essentially stories of the struggle for power, chronicling the lengths to which men in the mob go to gain or keep it by using force, cunning or treachery. Bhardwaj puts the plot of *Othello* to the service of this template. Consequently, where Iago's hostility towards Othello has distinct racial connotations – we see him speak derisively of Othello's Blackness right from the first scene – Tyagi's vendetta against Omkara comes across as nothing more than anger at being passed over in the race to gain a higher position and greater power in Tiwari's gang. Despite the disparity in their castes, one cannot read into Tyagi's motives any trace of casteism, since nothing he says or does indicates that his enmity is rooted in the low regard that the so-called 'upper castes' in India have for the so-called 'lower castes'. Indeed, he is genuinely loyal to Omkara before being denied the promotion: it is he who holds back the wedding procession of Dolly's would-be husband Rajjo and helps Omkara to elope with Dolly, and it is demonstrations of fealty such as this which, one presumes, make Omkara call Tyagi his 'bhai' ('brother'). Tyagi, in other words, seems less the racially prejudiced Iago who goes after a Black man, and more a character along the lines of, say, Carlo Rizzi from Francis Coppola's *The Godfather* (1974), who,

[4] Quoted in Stephen Alter, *Fantasies of a Bollywood Love Thief* (New Delhi, 2007), p. 51.

disgruntled at being refused the sort of wealth and power he thought he would enjoy as the son-in-law of the Corleone family, commits acts of betrayal that lead to Sonny Corleone's death. In fact, seeing that *Maqbool* contains an obvious homage to *The Godfather* in the scene where Jahangir Khan, the counterpart of Duncan, refuses a lucrative deal à la Vito Corleone, the idea that Bhardwaj's next Shakespeare adaptation would lend to a Shakespearian character (Iago) the traits of a character from *The Godfather* (Carlo) is not implausible. To put it more succinctly, since *Omkara* is a gangster film, and the lust for power that defines the motivations of many a character in such films is reason enough for Tyagi to turn against Omkara, the film does not bother to impart to Omkara a truly marginalized identity like Othello's, one which would make him the target of the prejudices that the haves typically display towards the have-nots. The aforementioned efforts to portray Omkara, despite his mixed heritage, as more of a powerful figure than a subaltern like Othello may also be attributed to the film's allegiance to the gangster genre, which, though at least nominally opposed to its protagonists' illegal way of life, also aims to fascinate viewers with the power they wield, and making Omkara a genuine subaltern is not conducive to that aim. Bhardwaj's love for gangster films is apparent to anyone familiar with his works. After *Maqbool* and *Omkara*, he directed *Kaminey* ('Scoundrels', 2009), a dark comedy-caper set in the Mumbai underworld, and wrote and produced Abhishek Chaubey's *Ishqiya* ('A Tale of Love', 2010), which portrays the misadventures of a pair of gangsters. He also penned the dialogues for the Iranian director Majid Majidi's Mumbai-based drama *Beyond the Clouds* (2016), which is the story of a young man's struggles to escape the drug mafia he works for. In the case of *Omkara*, this predilection for the gangster genre works against the film, at least as far as its handling of the issue of marginality is concerned.

Bhardwaj had cited *Kaliyattam*, a Malayalam take on *Othello*, as one of his models for making *Omkara*. Since *Kaliyattam* was not just a critically acclaimed work but also the sole instance of a direct adaptation of *Othello* in Indian cinema before *Omkara*, it makes sense that Bhardwaj would take his cues from that film while translocating Shakespeare's tragedy to India. But while *Kaliyattam* might have been helpful to Bhardwaj as a template for how to produce an *Othello* adaptation which keeps the plot unchanged while adding to it the requisite Indianizing touches, it also seems to have bequeathed to *Omkara* the neglectful treatment of the theme of marginality: like Bhardwaj's film, it introduces the topic of caste- and looks-based discrimination, only to sidestep it quickly and give us a depoliticized tale of a marriage turning bad. Perumalayan, the Othello of this film, is the lead dancer in a troupe of *theyyam* performers. *Theyyam* is a folk art form practised in parts of Kerala, in which music, dance and mime are fused into a performance that tells the stories of gods and legendary heroes. The leading dancer in this socio-religious spectacle is believed to become possessed with the divine figure(s) he is playing. Hence, despite hailing mostly from the so-called 'lower castes', these dancers are treated reverentially for the duration of their performances, even by the Brahmins. Retelling *Othello* against the backdrop of *theyyam* is thus a good opportunity to delve into the play's themes of marginality and discrimination.

Like *Omkara*, *Kaliyattam* makes Perumalayan an Other not just in terms of his caste but also his looks, and goes further than *Omkara* in this regard. Suresh Gopi, who plays Perumalayan, does not have Devgn's brawny physique, and Perumalayan not only is dark-skinned, but bears on his face scars caused by smallpox. The contrast that therefore exists between him and his so-called 'upper-caste', fair-skinned, beautiful wife Thamara is evidently meant to convey to viewers the sense of disruption that a marriage like this will create in a society such as Kerala's, a state with a long and complex history of caste-based discrimination. And yet that sense of disruption never really makes itself felt. Thamara's father is outraged when his daughter marries Perumalayan, but that outrage causes no significant hurt to the latter; the denizens of the village he resides in leave him alone

once Thamara attests that she has come with Perumalayan willingly, and the father, though still upset by the union, retreats as well. In real life, inter-caste marriages like Perumalayan and Thamara's in the rustic hinterlands of Kerala and other parts of India frequently lead to honour killings of the couple by the so-called 'upper-caste' people.[5] It is not clear why Perumalayan is spared any such horror. His position as the leading dancer of his *theyyam* troupe cannot explain this, for the reverence which dancers like him enjoy while they perform is, as Trisha Mitra says, 'fleeting', and does not extend beyond the sphere of those performances: 'He does represent an incarnation of a god and carries much respect within the performative space but outside it he is as disenfranchised as the rest of his community.'[6] When the Duke of Venice brushes aside Brabantio's complaints upon learning that Desdemona has married Othello voluntarily, he does so not because of his generosity in racial matters, but because of his vested interest in having Othello on his side, for he is faced with an imminent Turkish invasion, and will need Othello's military skills to deal with that crisis. The *naduvazhi* (chieftain) of Perumalayan's village has no such pressing reason to overlook the defying of the caste system which the protagonist's marriage with Thamara represents. It is curious, then, that neither the *naduvazhi* nor the other so-called 'upper-caste' people in the village demonstrate much anger at Perumalayan's relationship with Thamara, and, since we do not see him experience any casteist opprobrium, we cannot, also, read his character as a particularly marginalized one.

What dilutes the theme of marginality further is the film's characterization of Paniyan and Kanthan, the counterparts of Iago and Cassio, respectively. Iago's hostility towards Othello is, as mentioned earlier, tinged palpably with racial prejudice: he rarely speaks of the Moorish general without a disparaging reference to the latter's ethnicity. Consequently, it is both easy and accurate to read Iago's machinations against Othello as not just the misdeeds of an underling who feels slighted by his superior, but also as the violence inflicted by a white man on a Black man whom the white man thinks has gained more power than a non-white individual should. Paniyan's ploys against Perumalayan, however, carry no such connotation, because Paniyan belongs to the same so-called 'lower caste' as Perumalayan, and does not, therefore, belong to a dominant social group in the way Iago, being white, does vis-à-vis the Black Othello. The performer in the lowly role of the clown in Perumalayan's *theyyam* troupe, Paniyan, wants to be chosen as the successor to Perumalayan for the position of the lead dancer. When Perumalayan chooses Kanthan instead as the successor, Paniyan decides to avenge this perceived slight by destroying Perumalayan's marriage. Paniyan's grudge, then, is purely a personal one, and cannot be read as symbolic of the oppression of disenfranchised people by dominant ones in the way Iago's schemes against Othello can be. Kanthan, similarly, comes from the same caste and social status as Perumalayan, which makes the latter's suspicions regarding Kanthan and Thamara less credible. Othello believes Iago's lies regarding Desdemona and Cassio's dalliance because Iago taps, cleverly, into Othello's insecurity that his white wife will gravitate, as per the 'natural' order of things, towards a man of her own race. Since Kanthan is no upper-caste person as Thamara is, Perumalayan has little reason to entertain similar trepidations. It is true that Kanthan does not have the blemished countenance of Perumalayan, but even this cannot fully explain Perumalayan's insecurity. Thamara fell in love with him after seeing his *theyyam* performances. This means that she values his talents over his looks, and is swayed by him rather than the more handsome Kanthan, who performs alongside Perumalayan in those same *theyyam*s. A scene of

[5] Two such recent cases of honour killings in Kerala are the murders of Kevin P. Joseph in 2019, and Aneesh in 2020. They were from the so-called 'lower castes' and were killed by the families of the women they were married to.

[6] Trisha Mitra, 'The Othello-figure in three Indian films: *Kaliyattam, Omkara* and *Saptapadi*', in *Performing Shakespeare in India: Exploring Indianness, Literatures and Cultures*, ed. Sharmistha Panja and Babli Moitra Saraf (New Delhi, 2016), pp. 95–107; p. 100.

lovemaking between husband and wife further shows that Thamara has no issues with Perumalayan's appearance. Moreover, we learn later that it was Kanthan who acted as the go-between for Perumalayan and Thamara when they began seeing each other, thereby facilitating their romance. Collectively, these details undercut the idea that Perumalayan, like Othello, is a marginal figure whose insecurities are exploited by those who occupy the higher rungs of the society. Rather, like Omkara, he comes across simply as unusually jealous and gullible.

Indeed, scholars, in their analyses of the film, have concurred that it evades the issue of casteism and reduces *Othello* to a generic story of jealousy destroying a relationship. Koel Chatterjee states, 'Through the course of the film, the question of caste difference gives way to the emphasized theme of jealousy, as will be the case in *Omkara*.'[7] C. S. Venkiteswaran notes: '*Othello* is one of the most frequently filmed Shakespearean plays. Many of its cinematic versions have explored the racial difference and the conflicts it engenders. *Kaliyattam*, despite the scope for such explorations in terms of caste divisions and hierarchies ... desists from pushing this too far. Instead it focusses on the emotional conflicts arising out of jealousy, suspicion, ambition and desire.'[8]

Ania Loomba likewise observes:

> But although it seems that director Jayaraj wants to use both Shakespeare and Theyyam not to reflect upon either of them so much as upon the question of caste in Kerala, in this respect the film is ultimately disappointing, for it doesn't do anything with its explosive ingredients and with the astute positioning of Othello as the Theyyam 'kolam' [lead dancer]. ... While Theyyam has been the medium of social protest in Kerala, in this film the question of caste difference vanishes, and is not articulated alongside the theme of jealousy.[9]

None of these scholars has, however, written on the possible reasons as to *why* the film thus sidesteps the topic of caste, and therefore the topic of marginality. The answer to that *why* can perhaps be found in Jayaraj's proclivities as a director. His interest in telling stories of conflict and friction within families best explains why *Kaliyattam* is, despite its flirtations with the issues of caste and colour, ultimately just a story of domestic strife culminating in tragedy. *Kudumbasametham* ('With Family', 1992), for instance, charts the tensions between a son who opts for a career in music and a father who vehemently opposes this. *Paithrukam* ('Heritage', 1993) is also centred on a father–son conflict, this time over the question of faith; the father is a devout man while the son is a non-believer. *Thumboli Kadappuram* ('Thumboli Beach', 1995) shows the dilemma of a woman caught between the husband she loves and the father who does not like the husband. *Desadanam* ('Journey to Wisdom', 1996) tells the story of the dispute between three generations in a family when a grandfather decides to induct his grandson, who shows an uncommonly sharp grasp of religious scriptures at an early age, into a monastic order, while the boy's parents refuse to be thus separated from their son. The critical success enjoyed by these films, especially *Paithrukam* and *Desadanam*, is the most likely cause behind Jayaraj's decision to retell *Othello* in the same vein as these earlier films of his – that is, as yet another family drama, this time focused on husband and wife. His own words confirm this; in speaking of what drew him to *Othello*, Jayaraj remarks, 'The tragedy of Othello haunted me for many nights. Why would a man so much in love with his wife, kill her?'[10] He was

[7] Koel Chatterjee, 'Bollywood Shakespeares from Gulzar to Bhardwaj: Adapting, assimilating and culturalizing the Bard' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Royal Holloway University of London, 2018), p. 192: https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/files/29754322/2018ChatterjeeKPhD.pdf.

[8] C. S. Venkiteswaran, 'Shakespeare in Malayalam cinema: cultural and mythic interface, narrative negotiations', in *Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas: 'Local Habitations'*, ed. Paromita Chakravarti and Poonam Trivedi (New York, 2019), pp. 75–92; p. 82.

[9] Ania Loomba, 'Shakespeare and the possibilities of postcolonial performance', in *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance*, ed. Barbara Hodgdon and W. B. Worthen (Oxford, 2005), pp. 121–37; p. 131.

[10] 'A mix of history, folklore and Shakespeare', *The Hindu*, 31 August 2016, www.google.com/amp/s/www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/A-mix-of-history-folklore-and-Shakespeare/article14599953.ece/amp.

'haunted', then, not by how Othello's race is weaponized against him by a white society, but by the disintegration of a loving relationship and its culmination in murder. Unsurprisingly, then, that is what his film is preoccupied with, while treating Perumalayan's caste and dark, disfigured looks as superficial counterparts to Othello's Blackness – as features that make him, nominally, an outcast like Othello, even as the film defines him predominantly as a jealous husband. The auteurist approach to studying a filmmaker's works aims at identifying specific features of his films – stylistic touches, thematic concerns, genre preferences – that recur throughout his oeuvre and make it distinctive. If we adopt that approach to studying the two Indian *Othello* films discussed thus far, then it is fair to conclude that – just as Bhardwaj's interest in gangster films, coupled with the interest of the Hindi film industry in the same genre during the late 1990s and 2000s, led to his adapting *Othello* as a gangster drama – Jayaraj, owing to his predisposition towards sombre family dramas, and the success he had enjoyed as the maker of the same, interprets *Othello* as less a story of a marginalized man and more as the saga of a marriage that sours lethally.

Izzat and *Saptapadi*, the films I seek to discuss hereafter, differ from *Omkara* and *Kaliyattam* in two important ways. First, as has been mentioned earlier, *Izzat* and *Saptapadi* do not so much adapt *Othello* as appropriate it. While Bhardwaj and Jayaraj follow the plot of *Othello* faithfully and have characters who are recognizable counterparts to those in Shakespeare's play, *Izzat* and *Saptapadi* have plots and characters that are *not* analogous to those of *Othello*; rather, these latter films use references to *Othello* to address the themes of race and discrimination. Second, *Omkara* and *Kaliyattam* represent a comparatively niche variety of cinema. They may have the star-studded casts and song-and-dance sequences that characterize most mainstream Indian films, but the way they were advertised as Shakespeare adaptations, and (especially in the case of *Omkara*) the way the details of their screenings in national and international film festivals were announced prior to their release, make it clear that they were intended as prestige productions meant for a relatively elite audience, one that would have a more than passing knowledge of *Othello* and would appreciate the films for their links to the Bard. *Izzat* and *Saptapadi*, on the other hand, are, for the want of a better term, more 'massy', aimed not at any specific segment of the population but at all and sundry, and rely not on their references to Shakespeare but on their stars, music and wholesome, wish-fulfilling storylines to draw the viewers. They are, thus, more mainstream than *Omkara* and *Kaliyattam*, and this mainstream nature of the films plays, as we shall see, an important role in shaping their treatment of the theme of marginality.

Shekhar, the protagonist of *Izzat*, is the illegitimate son of a *zamindar* (landlord) and Savli, an *adivasi* (tribal) woman. When he learns, after Savli's death, that his father had cruelly discarded his mother after impregnating her, he vows revenge, and gets a job at the *zamindar*'s mill to get closer to the latter. Before long, he learns that he has a stepbrother, Dilip, who looks just like him, except for the complexion: Dilip has lighter skin, while Shekhar, being the son of an *adivasi* woman, is dark-complexioned. Upon Shekhar's arrival in the mill, a lot of people mistake him for Dilip, and wonder aloud how Dilip has become 'kala' (Black). The romance that develops later between Shekhar and the fair-skinned Deepa can be described as similar to Othello and Desdemona's romance, not just because of the inter-ethnic nature of their relationship, but also because *Othello* is directly invoked during their first meeting. During this meeting, Deepa is holding the book *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin,* while Shekhar picks up a copy of *Othello*, and their conversation veers towards the injustices meted out to Othello because of his race. The respective books that Shekhar and Deepa hold in this scene clarify that *Izzat* wished to draw parallels between Othello's plight as a Black man in a white society, and the plight, in post-independence India, of the *adivasi*s, who have often found themselves on the receiving end of violence and discrimination by the rich, so-called 'upper-caste' people. The latter are happy to use the *adivasi*s for their own pleasure or needs – seen in the

zamindar's liaison with Savli, and the fact that most of the workers in the *zamindar*'s mill are *adivasi*s – but never accord them equal rights, much as Othello, despite his services to the Venetian army, is still considered unfit to marry a white woman. Shekhar's conversation with Deepa on *Othello* shows that he has, like Othello, internalized some of the prejudice he is subjected to. Othello wonders, upon learning of Desdemona's supposed adultery, whether she has chosen Cassio over him because he, Othello, is Black. Shekhar, similarly, wonders if a'kala' and 'badsurat' ('ugly') person like Othello can really win the love and devotion of a beautiful woman like Desdemona. Later, his sense of insecurity becomes more prominent when Deepa says that she loves him; like Othello, he is unsure if he, who is also 'kala', is deserving of her love. Dilip, meanwhile, is romancing an *adivasi* woman called Jhumki, a relationship which Dilip's father, the *zamindar*, opposes. Shekhar, therefore, decides that he must make sure that Jhumki does not experience the jilting that his mother did, and that having Dilip marry Jhumki would also be the best revenge he can inflict on the *zamindar*. Lots of trials and tribulations ensue, but things turn out well in the end, with Shekhar marrying Deepa and Dilip marrying Jhumki, and the *zamindar* seeing the error of his ways and blessing these inter-ethnic couples.

The film, then, can be described as a positive spin on Shakespeare's play, one in which a marginalized protagonist's life does not end in tragedy. Certain choices made by the filmmakers, though, compromise its handling of marginality. The first and most egregious of these choices is the casting of Dharmendra as Shekhar and Dilip. Hailing from the state of Punjab, Dharmendra has the sort of fair complexion which mainstream Hindi cinema prefers in its leading men and women. That preference, in turn, is reflective of the obsession prevalent in India (and especially northern India, to which the Hindi film industry mainly caters) over fair skin – matrimonial advertisements in Indian newspapers routinely mention fair complexion as a desirable trait in prospective brides and grooms, those with darker complexion are considered less attractive, and beauty products which promise to lighten the skin do roaring business. *Izzat*, in casting Dharmendra as Shekhar, shows just how pervasive this obsession is: even as it aims to tell the story of a dark-skinned, half-*adivasi* man whose complexion is disdainfully commented on by those around him, it casts in that role not a dark-skinned actor, but a fair-skinned one like Dharmendra, who the viewers would know is not really 'kala'. The makers seemed to have wanted it both ways; they included in the film progressive diatribes against colour prejudices, while assuring the viewers, by casting a blackfaced Dharmendra as Shekhar, that they were adhering to the prevalent norms of beauty – that while Shekhar may be dark-skinned, the actor playing him is the usual *gora* (fair) hero of Hindi cinema who is merely wearing a layer of make-up. And even the application of that make-up/blackface on Dharmendra-as-Shekhar was likely deemed permissible by *Izzat*'s makers because the film also has Dharmendra-as-Dilip – that is, Dharmendra as he truly looks, Dharmendra the fair-skinned, handsome actor who had already gained a measure of success with releases such as Ramesh Saigal's *Shola aur Shabnam* ('Fire and Dew', 1961), Bimal Roy's *Bandini* ('The Shackled Woman', 1963), Mohan Kumar's *Ayee Milan Ki Bela* ('The Hour of Union Comes', 1964), Chetan Anand's *Haqeeqat* ('The Real World', 1964), O. P. Ralhan's *Phool aur Paththar* ('Flowers and Stones', 1966) and J. Om's *Aaye Din Bahar Ke* ('Happy Days Have Come', 1966). To sum up, the growing stardom of Dharmendra, whose conventional good looks contributed significantly to his popularity, and the view that fair complexions are more attractive than darker ones, which permeates the Indian society in general, led to the casting of Dharmendra in blackface – rather than an actor who is actually dark-skinned – as the part-*adivasi* man, with the simultaneous presence of the fair Dharmendra in Dilip's role underscoring both the dictate of stardom and the colourism. Jhumki, the tribal woman, is likewise played not by an actress of the character's ethnicity, but by Jayalalitha, who, like Dharmendra, was a fair-skinned rising star (albeit in Tamil and Kannada

films rather than Hindi ones) at the time of *Izzat*'s release. One can credibly assume that this practice of casting light-skinned actors adorned with blackface in roles that should have been played by dark-skinned performers was encouraged by similar trends in Hollywood; performers as respected as Orson Welles and Laurence Olivier had donned blackface, for instance, to play Othello. This practice has, rightly, been criticized in recent years for three reasons. Firstly, blackface has its roots in the American minstrel and vaudeville shows of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which white comedians darkened their faces to play Black people in acts that perpetuated harmful stereotypes regarding the Black community. Secondly, while white actors could don make-up to play Blacks and even win praise for that impersonation, the opposite was rarely true. As Ayanna Thompson says:

> In Shakespeare's lifetime, blackness was performed in two modes – exhibition (black people on display) and imitation (white men in racial prosthetics). Because in the exhibition mode all the power resided in the viewer (not the one exhibited), and because in the imitation mode all the power resided in the white, blacked up performer, performances of blackness were a white performance property for actors and audiences. In the nineteenth century, blackness and whiteness were performed by black actors for the first time in the United States and the United Kingdom, and their performances challenged the long-standing assumptions that (1) blackness was a white performance property and (2) only white actors could be virtuoso performers. These early nineteenth-century black performers were denigrated by white critics, white audiences, and their fellow white actors for 'aping' white performance modes.[11]

Thirdly, selecting white actors to play non-white characters deprives non-white actors of roles that should rightfully belong to them, creating race-based disparity in income and opportunity in the film industry. By the same token, the casting of a blackfaced Dharmendra, or even Jayalalitha (who was spared the blackface, presumably, because unlike Dharmendra, she did not have another role as a fair-skinned person in the film), as *adivasis* is equally deserving of criticism. After all, when a film professes to making a statement against the marginalization that *adivasi*s are subjected to for (among other things) their skin colour, and invokes *Othello* to make that point, but cannot even bring itself to cast dark-skinned actors for the *adivasi* characters, how sincere, really, is it in its condemnation of racial discrimination, and how well does it understand *Othello*?

Indeed, the aforementioned discussion on *Othello* between Shekhar and Deepa in the film hints at the makers' misunderstanding of the play and, by extension, of the subject of marginality. During that conversation, Deepa opines that Othello himself is responsible for the tragedy that befalls him, since he cannot shake off the chip on his shoulder regarding his race. This is a rather insensitive take on the play, since it is not Othello who cannot get over the fact that he is Black, but the people around him; it is they who view him, despite his accomplishments, as ultimately a racial Other, keep reminding him of the same, and then use his resultant insecurity against him. Deepa's misreading of the play puts the blame for Othello's insecurity on him, rather than on the discriminatory society he inhabits, which is tantamount to telling a marginalized person that his marginality is his own fault – that his anger at his oppressors, rather than the oppressor's crimes, is the reason behind his misery. Her flawed reading of *Othello* is important in the context of this film, for her view that Othello is responsible for his own misfortunes is reflected in the film's characterization of Shekhar. The latter comes to the *zamindar*'s estate with revenge on his mind, even making an unsuccessful attempt on the *zamindar*'s life in an early scene. Whether or not one supports the violence he was planning to inflict, there can be no doubt that Shekhar has good reason to hold the *zamindar*, and the upper-caste/upper-class society he represents, in contempt.

[11] Ayanna Thompson, *Blackface* (New York, 2021), p. 68.

Over the course of the film, however, Shekhar loses that sense of indignation and softens towards the *zamindar* family. As he says to the *zamindar* later, he made no further attempts to kill him because the love he had received from his half-siblings Dilip and Neelu (the *zamindar*'s daughter) prevented him from robbing them of their father. This is a curious thing for Shekhar to say, since neither Dilip nor Neelu display any particular affection for him at any point. Neelu treats him lovingly at first only because she mistakes him for Dilip; once she learns the truth, she betrays no fondness for Shekhar anymore. Dilip does treat him with a degree of friendliness, but is not above using Shekhar for his own ends. When the *zamindar* orders Dilip to marry Deepa, and Dilip can neither bring himself to do so nor summon up the courage to tell his father that he loves Jhumki and will marry only her, he asks Shekhar to impersonate him (Dilip) and meet Deepa instead, hoping that Shekhar's dark complexion will cause Deepa to turn him down as a prospective husband. This stratagem, based as it is on the assumption that Shekhar's complexion makes him unattractive, is quite insulting to him. So, when Shekhar speaks of the love he has received from Dilip and Neelu, one must wonder why the filmmakers have given the character such a line. The answer, in the light of Deepa's views on Othello, seems to be that the makers believed that if Shekhar is to avoid Othello's tragic end, he must rid himself of, as Deepa put it, the 'ahsas', or consciousness, of his marginalization. To do so, he must first rid himself of his anger at those who relegated him to his marginal position, and that is why the film posits, however unconvincingly, that Dilip's and Neelu's 'love' has blunted Shekhar's justified grudge against the *zamindar* and the upper strata of the society. As per the worldview propagated in the film, marginalization of the dispossessed is to be solved not by challenging the oppressors who cause the marginalization, but by adopting a conciliatory attitude towards the oppressors so that they treat the marginalized better. To validate this conservative stance, *Izzat* goes so far as to turn the *adivasis*, the marginalized group it had purportedly sought to champion, into the villains in the final segment of the film. The most serious hindrance to Dilip and Jhumki's eventual union comes not from the *zamindar*, but from Dukal, an *adivasi* man who lusts after Jhumki, and who injures Dilip and kidnaps Jhumki when the pair prepare to marry. Meanwhile, Manglu, another *adivasi* man who used to be the *zamindar*'s loyal bodyguard, turns against his employer upon discovering how the *zamindar* had treated Savli, whom Manglu knew and was fond of; he then incites the other *adivasis* to burn down the *zamindar*'s mill. The half-*adivasi* Shekhar, who had started out as a righteous fighter against the oppression of the *zamindar*s, must, by the final reels, battle the other *adivasi*s not just to rescue another *adivasi* (Jhumki), but also to defend the *zamindar* and his scion, Dilip. He even takes a bullet for the *zamindar*, prompting the latter to acknowledge Shekhar as his son. The grudge which the dispossessed and the marginalized hold against the powerful is, according to *Izzat*, the real threat, and they must, the film states, get over that grudge and demonstrate selfless camaraderie towards the powerful (as Shekhar does by protecting the *zamindar*'s mill and endangering his life for the *zamindar*) so as to win over the latter. As a half-*adivasi*, dark-skinned, illegitimate son of an unfeeling landlord, Shekhar is certainly a marginalized figure. But the film does his marginality a disservice by suggesting, via Deepa's opinion that Othello's *'ahsas'* of his marginality is the cause of his tragedy, that Shekhar's acute *'ahsas'* of his own marginal position at the beginning of the film is the real problem, and that he must dull that *'ahsas'* and endear himself to the powerful so as to gain their favour. The message in *Othello* is the exact opposite of this: Shakespeare shows us, realistically, that, even if a Black person serves a white society loyally, there is no guarantee that he will be treated well in return, that his position as a marginalized individual will change for the better. Despite its citation of *Othello*, therefore, *Izzat*'s understanding of the play's treatment of marginality leaves much to be desired.

If one is to understand the reasons why *Izzat* refrains from channelling Shakespeare's

uncompromisingly grim portrayal of the tragedy suffered by an ethnically marginalized character, one could start by noting that, despite the recent proliferation in scholarly writings on Shakespeare adaptations in Hindi cinema, the industry's engagement with the Bard has been sporadic. In the thirty years that make up the period of the 1950s to the 1970s, there had been only two Hindi films that count as Shakespeare adaptations: Kishore Sahu's *Hamlet* (1954), and Debu Sen's *Do Dooni Char* ('Two Times Two is Four', 1968), which is based on *The Comedy of Errors*. Neither was a box-office success. It would be fair to say that, during this period, Shakespeare was viewed by most in the Hindi film industry as highbrow and difficult. It was only after the commercial success of the *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations *Ek Duuje Ke Liye* ('Made for Each Other', 1981) and *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* ('From Calamity to Calamity', 1988) – directed by K. Balachander and Mansoor Khan, respectively – and Gulzar's *Angoor* ('Grapes', 1982), another adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors*, that Shakespeare came to be regarded as a lucrative source for mainstream Hindi cinema to tap. This paved the way for many other adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* (which Indian directors seem to adapt frequently because the play, in recounting the story of tragic, star-crossed lovers, echoes many such tales and legends – Laila and Majnu, Mirza and Sahiban, Heer and Ranjha – that already enjoy much popularity in India), Bhardwaj's trilogy (which consists of, alongside *Maqbool* and *Omkara*, the 2014 *Hamlet* adaptation *Haider*), and Sharat Katariya's *10ml Love* (2012), an adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *Izzat*, thus, was made at a time when Shakespeare was hardly staple material for Hindi cinema. Rather, what held sway in the industry at the time was the *masala* format. A colloquial term used, usually, in the context of Hindi cinema, *masala* refers to mainstream potboiler films that combine within themselves scenes of action, romance, comedy and melodrama, as well as songs and dances: a complete 'package' of entertainment. While this mode of filmmaking has been somewhat on the wane in recent years, it dominated Hindi cinema till the early 1990s, and *Izzat*, made during the 1960s – an era that was both the heyday of *masala* cinema and, as stated earlier, a period when adapting Shakespeare was not a common practice among Hindi filmmakers – unsurprisingly swears more of an allegiance to the dictates of *masala* cinema than to *Othello*. It must, hence, make space for multiple musical numbers, a prolonged comedy track, and a fight scene or two, leaving little time for a thorough exploration of marginality. It must make space, also, for a subject that is nearly ubiquitous in mainstream Hindi cinema: the sanctity of the family.

The influence of the two Indian epics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, on Hindi cinema is a well-acknowledged phenomenon, and since these epics often glorify devotion to family over personal interests (such as Rama accepting an unjust exile in deference to his father in *The Ramayana*, or the Pandava brothers marrying Draupadi to obey a command by their mother Kunti, even when that command was issued inadvertently, in *The Mahabharata*), the value of the family is also an oft-repeated theme, where protagonists are not autonomous individuals, but defined by their relationships with the members of their family, be it the one they were born into, or the one they have started with their life-partners. The figure of the loner (someone like Clint Eastwood's 'Man with No Name', for example) is virtually impossible to find in mainstream/*masala* Hindi releases. What is more, any conflict that exists in this cinema between the protagonists and their families usually culminates in a happy resolution. This is not only because mainstream/*masala* films aim chiefly to entertain and happy endings are more conducive to that goal than tragic ones, but also because Indian society is, on the whole, more family-oriented, and concerned less with celebrating individualism than Western ones (again, the glorification of familial obligations in the Indian epics and religious scriptures, and the dominant role they have played in shaping the average Indian mind, are reasons behind this), and films which reflect a pro-family stance have a better chance of receiving the viewers' patronage. This is why *Izzat* must replace Shekhar's anger at the *zamindar* with a growing affection for the latter and his children; no matter how exploitative or unethical the *zamindar* may have been, he is also

Shekhar's father, and sons (even illegitimate ones like Shekhar) in Hindi mainstream/*masala* films cannot go *completely* against their fathers, and an amicable resolution must somehow be worked out. Shekhar's climactic defending of his father against the *adivasi*s with whom he should have found greater common ground is motivated by this principle of Hindi mainstream/*masala* cinema: fidelity to family, that is to say, has to take precedence over the forging of solidarity among the marginalized. Hence, *Othello*, in an out-and-out *masala* production such as *Izzat*, can remain only a point of reference to illustrate what racial prejudice is. It cannot become the film's main constituent element, because the rules of *masala* cinema prevent it from becoming so.

Saptapadi is similarly compromised in its portrayal of marginality owing to its being a particular sort of mainstream film – a Bengali romantic melodrama with Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen in the lead roles. This pair, following the success of releases like Agradoot's *Agnipariksha* ('Trial by Fire', 1953) and Sudhir Mukherjee's *Shapmochan* ('The Lifting of the Curse', 1955), quickly came to be regarded as the quintessential romantic couple of Bengali cinema, and many of their subsequent films, even when drawing upon literary sources that are not romantic in nature, mould those literary works into romantic tales to cater to the actors' fan following. One sees this in the films *Sabar Uparey* ('Above All Else', 1955) and *Kuhak* ('The Enchanter', 1960), both directed by Agradoot. These films are adaptations of A. J. Cronin's *Beyond This Place* (1950) and Davis Grubb's *The Night of the Hunter* (1953), respectively. But where both of these novels are works of crime fiction, their Bengali screen adaptations attenuate the crime-and-detection aspects of the novel to play up Kumar's star appeal as the romantic hero. Hence, while *Beyond This Place* is primarily about a son's quest to prove that his father has been unjustly imprisoned for a murder he never committed, *Sabar Uparey* uses the storyline of the father's travails only to facilitate the romance between the characters played by Kumar and Sen, as the latter helps the former to free his father. The focus in the film shifts from the son's detective work to prove his father's innocence to the blossoming love between Kumar's and Sen's characters, and the consolidation of that love into imminent marriage. Such, indeed, was Kumar's stature as a romantic hero that the desire to show him as such often dominated the filmmakers' consciousness even when he was cast opposite heroines other than Sen. In *Kuhak*, for instance, he is paired with Sabitri Chatterjee, but the film still prioritizes romance over everything else. *The Night of the Hunter* has for its protagonist an unrepentantly psychopathic, murderous pastor, who terrorizes a couple of children to learn the location of a hidden pile of money. Kumar plays the counterpart of the pastor in *Kuhak*, but his character is hardly the psychopath from the novel – instead, he is a man torn between his greed for the money and his love for a woman, with the latter impulse ultimately winning. *Saptapadi*, similarly, may adduce *Othello* to endorse the inter-racial, inter-religious love story it narrates, but is more invested in portraying its leads as devoted lovers than as marginal entities.

The *Othello* reference in the film comes in the form of a staging of the play at a medical college in Calcutta, with the protagonists Krishnendu (Kumar) and Rina (Sen) playing Othello and Desdemona, respectively. Krishnendu is an Indian Hindu, and Rina a Christian and the daughter of an Englishman. Their relationship, prior to their participation in the play, is fraught with hostility, especially on the part of Rina, who calls Krishnendu a 'darkie' and a 'heathen'. As the film is set during the early 1940s, when World War II was under way and India was under British rule, the enmity of a white woman like Rina could have had serious repercussions for a colonized subject like Krishnendu. But since the film is conceptualized, more than anything else, as an Uttam–Suchitra romance, Rina never becomes a threat to Krishnendu – the latter, in fact, laughs off her slurs and even plays pranks on her in return. These initial tussles between them take the shape of a popular convention in romantic films, where the hero and the heroine start out on the wrong footing but eventually fall in love. Krishnendu and Rina thus come across in these portions as lovers-to-be, and

not as a colonized Indian man who experiences marginalization at the hands of a member of the colonizing British.

The film, as a matter of fact, is eager to ensure that viewers do *not* see Krishnendu as marginalized. Instead, in deference to Kumar's stardom, *Saptapadi* portrays him as someone who stands tall among his peers. An excellent student, a skilled footballer and a gifted actor, he is intellectually, physically and culturally the equal, if not the superior, of the British people around him, and the latter recognize him as such. Clayton, the British student with whom Krishnendu fights during a football match, and whom he replaces in the *Othello* production, congratulates Krishnendu for his impressive performance in the play, and so does Clayton's white fiancée. Rina is won over by his performance as well, and they start a relationship. The film tries, in these scenes, to show not just how a play on interracial love brings together two individuals from different races who were initially at loggerheads, but also how Krishnendu uses a play by Shakespeare, the greatest of British cultural icons, to prove his worth as an Indian to the British, to win their respect and, in Rina's case, love. Since *Saptapadi* is a star-centric production, and since it is Krishnendu's acting (rather than his academic achievements or prowess at football) that ultimately wins Rina's heart (and the admiration of the other British characters), one would not be wrong in reading the rapturous reception of Krishnendu's performance as the film's meta-commentary on Kumar's popularity as an actor. But in choosing to highlight Kumar's stardom and showing Rina's (and, by extension, the other British individuals') prejudices melting away in the face of his thespian abilities, *Saptapadi*, like *Izzat*, misses the point that *Othello* makes regarding marginality: that where there is a fundamental imbalance of power (as there is between the lone Black man Othello and the prejudiced, dominantly white Venetian society, and as there was between the British and the Indians in colonial India), those on the lower end of that imbalance do not cease to be vulnerable just because they have performed a feat which pleases or serves the interests of the powerful. That is why Othello meets a tragic end despite his services as a general of Venice. So the idea that Krishnendu would cease to be a 'darkie' and a 'heathen' to the British just because he has acted splendidly in a Shakespeare production is wishful thinking, and the inclusion of such a development in the film can be explained only by its greater commitment to being a star vehicle for Kumar and Sen than to being a study of marginality.

Tied to this avoidance of the theme of marginality is the film's portrayal of Krishnendu's relationship with Rina as less 'scandalous' than that between Othello and Desdemona. Krishnendu starts out as someone who, as Paromita Chakravarti puts it, has a 'poised balance of modernity and tradition',[12] as a student of medical science who plans to go abroad for higher studies while displaying a 'cheeky resistance against Anglicisation' when confronted with the anti-Indian prejudice of the British.[13] Once he falls in love with Rina, and her father demands that Krishnendu convert to Christianity if he is to marry her, Krishnendu readily agrees. He attributes this readiness to his agnosticism, declaring that he would happily leave Hinduism behind and embrace Christ if this lets him marry the woman he loves. The conversion, however, marks the beginning of what Chakravarti describes as the loss of his 'indigenous identity', for he 'ends up adopting the archetypal role of evangelical colonialism – that of the missionary priest',[14] thereby severing ties with both the Hindu identity he was born into and the agnostic identity he had chosen for himself. It is as if the film, having paired an Indian man and a white woman romantically, decides that such a coupling is excessively disruptive, and must be

[12] Paromita Chakravarti, 'Modernity, postcoloniality, and *Othello*: the case of *Saptapadi*', in *Remaking Shakespeare: Performance across Media, Genres and Cultures*, ed. Pascale Aebischer, Nigel Wheale and Edward Esche (London, 2003), pp. 39–55; p. 50.

[13] Chakravarti, 'Modernity, postcoloniality, and *Othello*', p. 50.

[14] Chakravarti, 'Modernity, postcoloniality, and *Othello*', p. 49.

rendered more palatable by reducing the differences between Rina and Krishnendu. Hence, Krishnendu, to quote Chakravarti, undergoes an 'assimilation into the white, Christian society'[15] of Rina through his adoption of Christianity and evangelism, a process that can be said to have reached its completion when he, in the final scene, is seen carrying Rina to a church, to be 'united in the eye of a patently Christian God'.[16] Rina, meanwhile, learns that she is something of a 'darkie' herself, birthed as she was through an illicit liaison between her British father and his Indian servant, which means that her attraction to Krishnendu was not as strange or unusual a development as it seemed. The racial and religious chasm between them thus lessened, the union between them is now more plausible. What is notable here is that both Krishnendu's conversion and the realization on Rina's part that she is not racially 'pure' could have been used to construct for them marginalized identities, but the film does not do so. The unjust nature of the demand by Rina's father that Krishnendu become a Christian, which is essentially a colonizer's attempt to impose part of his identity on a colonized to 'improve' the latter, is barely allowed to register; Krishnendu's aforementioned agnosticism means that he thinks little of changing his religion, which in turn prevents the viewers from seeing it as an example of colonial hegemony at work. Later, when he does become a Christian, his condition could have mirrored that of the Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt, who converted to Christianity in order to become more 'English' but instead found himself in limbo – disowned, on one hand, by his orthodox religious father, and treated, despite his conversion, as a second-class citizen by the British. But *Saptapadi* shows no such discrimination against Krishnendu by the British post-conversion, and while he does have a conservative Hindu father he grows estranged from, that estrangement turns out to be temporary. The father, having emotionally blackmailed Rina into deserting Krishnendu, eventually grows contrite, and facilitates the lovers' reunion. Krishnendu thus finds a place among the colonizers through his embracing of Christianity, wins his traditionalist father's approval, *and* gets the girl – which is hardly what a marginalized subaltern's life looks like. As for Rina, there is little indication that her true identity – that of a mixed-race woman born out of wedlock – is known to the world at large. No matter how tormented she herself may have grown upon learning this, to others she still occupies the privileged position of a white woman in a colonized land. The only person to whom she confesses her racial identity is the non-judgemental Krishnendu, which means that she is in little danger of becoming a racial Other like Othello. Instead, by integrating Krishnendu among the British via his conversion and the services he renders to the colonizers as a doctor during the war (while also effecting a reconciliation with his Hindu father), and by making Rina a half-Indian (who nonetheless remains a part of the British society owing to her white appearance and the services that *she* renders as a nurse to the British army), *Saptapadi* ensures that its couple find enough middle ground to remain together, rather than splintering apart like the Black Othello and white Desdemona. Uttam's brother, Tarun Kumar, describes in a memoir how Tarun had persuaded Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, on whose novel *Saptapadi* was based, to give the filmmakers the permission to alter the novel's downbeat ending into a happier one, so as to convey to viewers a message on the power of love to overcome all impediments.[17] Such a message was needed because the film had in the lead stars whose success had been built on romantic dramas that usually had a happy ending, and a tragic ending like those of Bandopadhyay's novel or *Othello* was less likely to find favour with the audience. The refusal to make Krishnendu or Rina a marginalized entity aims, one can therefore guess, to reach that desired happy ending more easily.

[15] Chakravarti, 'Modernity, postcoloniality, and *Othello*', p. 50.
[16] Chakravarti, 'Modernity, postcoloniality, and *Othello*', p. 50.
[17] Tarun Kumar, *Aamar Dada Uttam Kumar* (Kolkata, 2000), p. 188.

CONCLUSION

Among Shakespeare's plays, *Othello*, with its focus on the themes of race and marginality, should have a particular resonance in India, a formerly colonized nation which has, since independence, witnessed numerous conflicts caused by divisions of religion, caste and ethnicity. Yet, as I have endeavoured to demonstrate in this article, the Indian screen adaptations and appropriations of *Othello*, regardless of the era and the language they were made in, have, despite their surface engagement with it, ultimately circumvented the play's theme of marginality. I have attempted – by following the approach to studying screen adaptations that Karen Kline calls the Materialist paradigm – to understand why each of these films thus avoids the theme of marginality that is so crucial to Shakespeare's play. In the case of *Omkara*, I have discussed how its apparently marginal titular character is anything but, and have explored, further, how its director's love for gangster films, which is reflective of Hindi cinema's turn-of-the-millennium fascination with that genre, led to the film's evasion of the themes of marginality. *Kaliyattam* is equally evasive in that regard, and the reason, I have argued, is, again, its director's penchant for making a particular type of film – namely, the family melodrama – which made him treat *Othello* as just a story of a disintegrating marriage. With *Izzat* and *Saptapadi*, I have tried to show how the onscreen personae of the lead actors in these films, and, in *Izzat*'s case, the dictates of the *masala* cinema format, prevented them from delving meaningfully into Othello's marginalized identity even as they referenced the play.

Interestingly, while these adaptations of *Othello* have consistently sidestepped the subject of marginality, other Indian releases have adapted/appropriated other Shakespeare plays to explore and celebrate marginal identities. Nagraj Manjule's *Sairat* ('Wild', 2016) uses the *Romeo and Juliet* template to tell an inter-caste love story which (unlike *Omkara* and *Kaliyattam*) does not shy away from depicting casteist violence; Kenny Basumatary's *Local Kung Fu 2* (2017), an adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors*, includes a gay character and decries homophobia, and Vandana Kataria's *Noblemen* (2019) is an interesting, if not entirely successful, attempt to draw parallels, via its chronicling of a production of *The Merchant of Venice* in a posh Indian boarding school, between the theme of anti-Semitism in that play and the culture of bullying and homophobia prevalent in such schools. Even Bhardwaj shows greater willingness to tackle marginal identities with his third Shakespeare adaptation, *Haider*, than he did with *Omkara*, using *Hamlet* to depict the human rights violations faced by Kashmiri Muslims. The Materialist paradigm may be employed to determine what factors and circumstances enabled these films, many of which are not even based on an issue-oriented play such as *Othello*, nevertheless to address social issues and examine marginality meaningfully. The merit of the Materialist paradigm is that it forgoes the usual practice of equating fidelity with quality, and concentrates, instead, on the determinants that shape an adaptation into the faithful or non-faithful film that it is, thereby providing us with a more complete understanding of the processes through which a work of literature is turned into a work of cinema. So, just as this paradigm has been used in this article to explain why various Indian screen versions of *Othello* have circumvented the play's theme of marginality, it can be used, also, to understand why the other Indian Shakespeare adaptations/appropriations mentioned in this paragraph incorporate that theme even if it means deviating from their source plays. Through such an exercise, we can gain a greater insight into how Shakespeare has been used to address the less-than-pleasant realities of India.