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## Anti-Othellos and Postcolonial Others in *Izzat* and *Aastha*

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### ABSTRACT

*While Indian cinematic adaptations that attempt to recreate William Shakespeare's Othello have received scholarly attention, practically no work has been done on films that make fleeting references to the source text while questioning its authority. This article aims to fill the gap by presenting two Hindi-language postcolonial adaptations, namely Izzat (1968) and Aastha (1997), that can be read as anti-Othello films. They challenge Shakespeare's status as a colonial icon in independent India by terming his works as 'rotting feudal tales' and by subverting Othello's murder of Desdemona. However, although men of 'low', mixed or ambiguous origins do not kill their wives in these two adaptations, both films still depict the marginalization of caste, class and gender Others. This article will study the tension between these on-screen Others and the anti-Othello stance.*

This article aims to study the presence and significance of William Shakespeare's *Othello* in fleeting intertextual interactions with two Indian films titled *Izzat* (Rao 1968) and *Aastha: In the Prison of Spring* (Bhattacharya 1997), both directed by male filmmakers. It argues that these two Hindi-language films that discuss and dissect this play in sequences less than five minutes long, with male and female protagonists who bear tangential connections with the Othello and Desdemona characters, could be read as anti-Othello adaptations. This is because in spite of the domination and manipulation of Indian men from 'lower'<sup>1</sup> castes – a transposition of the perhaps anachronistic but crucial notion of the 'inferior black race' from the source text – or suspicions of the female protagonists' infidelity, the Othellos do not kill their Desdemonas in both films. *Izzat* and *Aastha* (the suffix of the latter film will not be mentioned from now on) are neither 'full-strength Shakespeare adaptations' nor are they 'relatively "weak" in the Shakespeare-play-within-the-film genre' that Richard Burt refers to when he writes: 'As opposed to full-strength Shakespeare adaptations, Shakespeare appears as relatively "weak" in the Shakespeare-play-within-the-film genre' (Burt 2010: 7). They do not attempt to recreate the plot or portray multiple characters from the source play like 'full-strength' adaptations such as the Malayalam-language film *Kaliyattam*

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<sup>1</sup> The usage of adjectives such as 'high', 'upper', 'low' and 'lower' within quotation marks to refer to imposed caste hierarchies reflect the ideological position of this author and will be used throughout this article.

(Jayaraj 1997) and the Hindi-language film *Omkaara* (Bhardwaj 2006). They are also unlike the three ‘weak’ Indian *Othello* films that feature Act 5, Scene 2 of the play where Othello murders Desdemona: M. Natesan’s 1953 Tamil-language film *Anbu*, Ajoy Kar’s 1961 Bengali-language film *Saptapadi* and Dada Mirasi’s 1963 Tamil film *Ratha Thilagam*. These three early postcolonial films unabashedly put the ‘great’ playwright on a pedestal with lines such as ‘Why did Shakespeare write such difficult plays? I’m suffering because of him!’ and ‘Your acting would’ve made even Shakespeare turn in his grave!’ In doing so, they hint at colonial supremacy and Eurocentrism as well as the ‘axiomatic superiority of literature to film’ (Stam 2005: 4) and the view that adaptations are ‘secondary and inferior’, ‘never as good as the “original”’ (Hutcheon 2006: xiv).



*Figures 1 and 2: The Desdemona and Othello characters in Saptapadi and Ratha Thilagam, respectively, just before the former is killed by the latter. (All images have been sourced from the films referenced in the bibliography)*

On the contrary, *Izzat* and *Aastha* feature ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ caste/class male and female characters who explicitly question the Othello character’s judgements and actions. Shakespeare’s tragic love story *Romeo and Juliet* is also dismissed as a ‘rotting feudal tale’ in *Aastha*. By extension, such categorical criticism of the colonial icon’s works can be seen as the denunciation of the British Empire itself, which ruled pre-partition India as the British East India Company from 1757 to 1858, and the British Raj from 1858 until Indian independence in 1947. In keeping with this observation, I would like to expand on Burt’s taxonomy of full-strength and weak depictions of Shakespeare on-screen and propose a third category of what I will call *Shakespeare-reprisal* films. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word ‘reprisal’ as an ‘act of retaliation for some injury or attack’ and the word ‘reprise’ as ‘the repetition of a theatrical performance; a restaging or rewriting of a play’ as well as ‘to make reprisals’ (1989: 664–65). Both reprise and reprisal are relevant to *Izzat* and *Aastha* – the former on account of their very referencing of Shakespeare, and the latter in that they challenge the playwright’s authority by criticizing his works and characters and, more

importantly, by refashioning *Othello*'s denouement to depict happy rather than tragic endings. However, despite the rewritten climaxes in these anti-Othello, Shakespeare-reprisal adaptations, the two films nevertheless highlight the power wielded by the 'upper' caste, privileged-class, fair-complexioned Hindu man over dark-skinned, caste, class, religion and gender Others in independent India.

This article aims to scrutinize the tension between these on-screen Others and the anti Othello stance by examining the shift in attitudes towards Shakespeare and marginalized groups in the time gap of 30 years between *Izzat* and *Aastha*, from early postcolonial India of the 1960s ridden with social unrest and protest to the 1990s influenced by economic liberalization and exposure to 'Western' sexual freedom. Apart from the diachronic dimension, the regional dimension of the two plot locations (small town and metropolitan city, respectively) and the genre (popular Bollywood 'formula' film versus experimental 'parallel' cinema) will also be considered. I will start by presenting the way in which the two films challenge or maintain colonial authority – be it by questioning Shakespeare's works and taking an anti-Othello stand or venerating light-skinned Indians by equating them to the 'white' colonial master. The second part of the article will focus on the postcolonial hegemony vested in Indian elite groups by highlighting the ways in which Indigenous tribal<sup>2</sup> communities are fetishized and tormented. Finally, the issue of constructed gender roles and the manner in which the male and female characters of both films are socialized to play them within the (evolving) patriarchal set-up will be tackled.

## COLONIAL AUTHORITY AND THE ANTI-OTHELLO STANDPOINT

*Izzat* foregrounds the issues of caste and class that are still deeply entrenched in the stratification of Indian society within the district of Ramgarh, located in the eastern state of Jharkhand. The small-town setting of the film is ideal to emphasize the divide between wealthy 'upper' caste Indians and Indigenous tribal communities that are also known as *adivasis* (*adi* meaning original and *vasi* meaning inhabitants). It is important to note that the millennia-old construct of caste in the Indian subcontinent that was codified by the British as the caste system automatically categorizes its population by birth. Today, the family that one is born into determines if one would be part of the 'forward' or 'general' category, the Other Backward Classes (OBC), the Scheduled Castes (SC, or the erstwhile outcastes or untouchables) or the Scheduled Tribes (ST, that were often classified as criminal tribes during the British rule). In *Izzat*, there is, on the one hand, the Thakur family, their palatial mansion and their sprawling estates and warehouses, making them

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2 The words 'tribal' and '*adivasi*' will be used to designate members of Indigenous communities of India who are officially classified as Scheduled Tribes.

ostensibly from the 'upper' caste and privileged class. On the other hand, there are domestic workers employed for various jobs, most likely from the OBC community. One of them is identified to be from a tribal community, whereas the others are from the underprivileged financial classes of society (often illiterate or semi-literate, who have no choice but to work in the homes of dominant groups). We see the feudal implications of the Thakur surname (literally lord or master) play out in several ways – in the verbal domination of domestic workers by the perpetually cane-wielding Thakur, in the visual impact of him being only the character shown galloping on horseback, in the nonchalant and entitled manner in which he rapes a scantily clad tribal girl in his youth.

The illegitimate son born out of that violation (Shekhar) grows up to be the splitting image of Thakur's legitimate son (Dilip). Shekhar learns about his secret lineage as an adult and sets out to murder his father in order to avenge his dead mother. Both characters are played by the naturally fair-skinned actor Dharmendra in a double role, but the difference between Dilip and Shekhar's skin colour is striking. The actor retains his natural skin colour to play Dilip but puts on brownface makeup to play his stepbrother Shekhar. This is because Shekhar's mother Saavli was shown as a dark-skinned *adivasi* woman. The use of brownface makeup is the first reference to the former domination of the Global South by the Global North, rooted in the ethnic superiority of 'White' masters over 'Black' slaves in the United States, with blackface minstrelsy historically used by the former to mock the latter. The mockery that Shekhar is subjected to comes from him being nicknamed *kaalia* ('blackie') in his entourage. He also becomes the victim of a case of mistaken identity, with his dark complexion seen as a party disguise when he reaches the Thakur mansion for his revenge. This is because having skin as light as possible is a sign of power and privilege in India. The multi-million-dollar fairness product industry in the country provides ample ocular proof of the internalized inferiority of dark skin that still stains the Indian psyche, and of the blind admiration accorded to fair skin as a means of deifying the white-skinned master who continues to reign supreme in colonized Indian minds: 'Frantz Fanon recognised the centrality of the need to decolonize the mind, a task which he envisaged as far more difficult than the mere removal of the colonizer' (Alhuwalia 2001: 39).

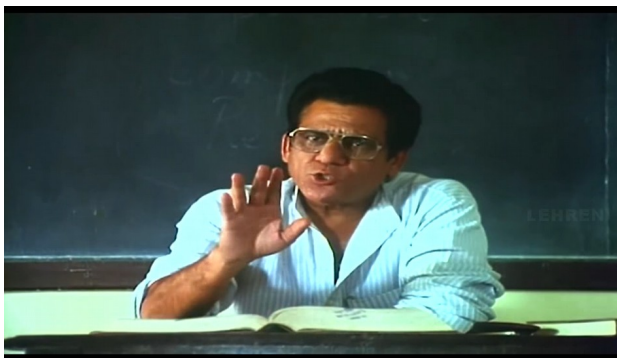
Interestingly, despite the visible difference in Shekhar and Dilip's skin colour, *Izzat* also plays on the comedy-of-errors trope that is commonly used in Indian cinema featuring double roles, with reactions from other characters ranging from surprise to denial. When Thakur orders Dilip to go and see a girl called Deepa from the same caste and class for an arranged marriage, Dilip in turn sends his stepbrother Shekhar instead. Dark-skinned Shekhar finds himself at the receiving end of Deepa's parents' colour-blind reactions; they insist that 'rich people's children could never be dark-skinned' and even compliment Shekhar on his 'fair skin' by telling him he looks '*bilkul* English'

(absolutely like an Englishman). The continued acceptance of colonial authority is highlighted not only in this idolization of fair skin but also, more importantly in this case, in a sequence where Shekhar asks Deepa if she thinks Othello or Desdemona was responsible for the tragedy. When Deepa blames dark-skinned Othello and his inferiority complex, Shekhar insists on the fair Desdemona's guilt due to her 'dazzling beauty that couldn't help but attract Othello to her like a moth to a flame', and Deepa eventually agrees with him. This discussion shows that unlike early postcolonial films like *Anbu*, *Saptapadi* and *Ratha Thilagam* that indiscriminately worship the playwright and his work, it is not blasphemous to question the play's content and the characters' moral fabric and actions in *Izzat*. As for Deepa's ultimate acquiescing to Shekhar's ideas, it could be attributed to the (unwritten) rules of gender hierarchy in 1960s India that took precedence over her privileged caste and class location and light complexion. Surprisingly, Iago is not blamed by either of them, which conclusively points to a belief in an innate and inevitable female culpability.

Deepa's compliance with Shekhar's ideas also mirrors Desdemona's 'duty' that was 'due to the Moor my lord' (*Othello* 1.3: 202). Deepa and Shekhar fall in love after their first exchange about *Othello*; this is conveyed with the help of lilting background music when Shekhar emotively asks her at the end of the passionate exchange: '*Kya matlab, aap is tragedy ko daurana chahti hain?*' ('Does this mean you want to recreate this tragedy?') Deepa's attraction towards Shekhar reflects that of Desdemona's towards Othello 'for the dangers I had passed' (*Othello* 1.3: 169); this is portrayed when Deepa chooses a black rose over a red one because 'it's rare and grows after a lot of toil'. Thus, we could say that Shakespeare's authority is questioned to a limited extent in this film by the female character albeit quickly revoked in a bid to dutifully agree with her man so that she could be accepted as a suitable bride. In spite of the hegemonic superiority of men over women irrespective of class, caste and complexion and Shekhar's defence of the Othello character, he does not murder Deepa, which indicates that *Izzat* can indeed be seen as anti-Othello (although the choice to have a happy ending may have been dictated by the nature of popular, commercial Bollywood potboilers).

Three decades later, the 1997 *Aastha* revolves around a middle-class Mumbai University lecturer called Amar, who teaches the playwright's works, and his homemaker wife Mansi. Amar rejects Shakespeare's authority outright by declaring to his class full of students that *Romeo and Juliet* was not a love story but a 'rotting feudal tale' about 'individual strife and dying together'. While teaching *Othello*, he contradicts his students who justify Desdemona's killing by pointing to her possible infidelity. Amar insists that Othello was guilty of a premeditated, cold-blooded murder: 'He didn't love Desdemona but was obsessed with possessing her. He was in love with the idea of loving her'. Amar is thereby depicted as an anti-Othello figure of sorts, even as his wife Mansi is

shown to possess shades of Desdemona (who depends on her husband financially at the beginning of the film) as well as shades of Bianca (when she starts moonlighting as a clandestine prostitute in order to afford making purchases for her husband, their school-going daughter and for herself). Mansi's first and regular client is referred to by just his last name, that is, Mr Dutt, which is a common surname in the Brahmin community, considered the 'highest' in India's caste hierarchy. One wonders if it is a coincidence that the extremely fair-skinned actor Navin Nischol was chosen to play Mr Dutt, almost in a bid to keep Mansi's character as 'pure' and untainted as possible, thanks to his caste and light complexion (again, a sign of colonial-era supremacy).



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*Figures 3–6: Amar convinces his students that Othello committed a premeditated murder, insisting that 'Othellos are killing Desdemonas' even today.*

However, Amar learns of Mansi's infidelity towards the end of the film, following a mousetrap device of sorts used by her along with Amita, who is one of Amar's students. When Amita initially catches Mansi red-handed and confronts her, Mansi breaks down and confides in Amita. Mansi weeps in her arms, turning Amita into an Emilia-like figure, giving the spectator a visual rendition of the Willow song. Soon after, Mansi convinces Amita to narrate a fictionalized, anonymous story of a housewife prostituting herself in order to discern his reaction. Amita does so during a get-together in Amar and Mansi's home, in the presence of Mansi as well as many of Amar's students. This is where Amar's anti-Othello stand comes to the forefront; he insists that all

husbands would not react in the same way. In what turns out to be the resolution of the film, Amar puts himself in the supposedly fictional woman's shoes and defends her. Here is my proposed translation of the words he utters in Hindi: She could have chosen to get divorced or to commit suicide yet she kills herself every day by choosing to live with her family. Similarly, her husband could leave her, kill her or divorce her but he could also choose to understand her. (Bhattacharya 1997: 1:52:42, translation added) Amar adds that Amita's tale could even culminate in a beautiful love story. Finally, after the students leave, when Mansi asks Amar if he too would understand her had she been the woman in the story, he simply embraces her, both of them teary-eyed. This is the last scene of *Aastha*, and this could lead us to term not only Amar's character but the film itself as anti-Othello.

### FETISHIZATION AND DEHUMANIZATION OF *ADIVASI* OTHERS

Just as *Aastha* is anti-Othello to a greater degree when compared to *Izzat*, there is an increased humanization of the tribal Other in the former film. Edward Said's statement that 'each age and society re-creates its "Others"' (1995: 332) is observed when the colonial self and the colonized Other (depicted in *Saptapadi* as 'superior' British rulers and 'inferior' Indian natives, for instance) transform into the elite dominant caste/class Indian self and the 'outcaste' *adivasi* Other in the two films. In both *Izzat* and *Aastha*, despite attempts made by mediators to unite the worlds of elite and marginalized Indians, they remain mutually exclusive to a certain extent, with markers such as skin colour, names of characters as well as places of worship emphasizing their dissimilarities. First of all, the names of most characters from the *adivasi* communities in both films, such as Kamli, Mungroo, Saavli and Jhumki, are easily discernible as not belonging to privileged caste/class Indian society. Two male *adivasis* have the same name (Mungroo) in *Izzat* and *Aastha*, while two female domestic workers employed by two wealthy elite 'masters' are called Gangi in *Izzat*, with basic onomastics hinting at the commonness, interchangeability and replaceability of disadvantaged groups.

Furthermore, both films use names of two *adivasi* women, Saavli and Kamli, as proper nouns as well as common nouns, anthropomorphically transforming them from human to object, from specific to generic. For instance, *Izzat* features the line: 'Thakur log kisi bhi saavli ki izzat loot liya karte the' ('Thakurs used to rape any *saavli*, i.e., any oppressed-caste/class woman'), and *Aastha* has: 'Jaising ko jaisi kamli chahiye vaisi kharid ke de' ('Buy the type of *kamli*, i.e., a wife, that Jaising desires'). Character names in *Izzat* are also inextricably linked to their innate superiority or inferiority that accompanies them all their life. Male members from the Thakur family are simply referred to as *bade* Thakur (Thakur senior) or *chhote* Thakur (Thakur junior) as a sign of respect for



the surname and the community in question. At the other end of the spectrum, Saavli means dark(ness), and she names her son Shekhar (one of many names of Shiva, the dark-skinned deity of destruction in the Hindu pantheon). When Jhumki (Dilip's love interest) mistakes Shekhar for Dilip, she asks him why he is ignoring her: '*Tan toh kaala ho gaya, mann bhi kaala kar liya?*' ('Your body has become black, you've blackened your mind too?'), bringing to mind the Duke's words to Brabantio: 'Your son-in-law is more fair than black' (*Othello* 1.3: 286). Apart from Saavli and Shekhar, other members of their clan are dark-skinned too. There is nevertheless one exception to the film's covert suggestion that all *adivasis* are dark-skinned, which makes one wonder why Shekhar had to be portrayed in brownface. That exception is the fair-skinned *adivasi* girl Jhumki, played by actor-politician Jayalalithaa. This makes the film unintentionally subvert the far-from-true but common belief that all *adivasis* are dark-skinned (and therefore innately inferior) and that all dominant caste/class Indians are fair-skinned (and thus obviously superior), and it somewhat naively ends up contradicting itself.

Where the film does not contradict itself but repeat its convictions almost to the point of verbal and visual *déjà vu* is in its relationship with religion(s) and places of worship. In this context, one figure who could be seen as part of the (almost colonial) elite, quite literally a father figure is a Christian priest who is also the principal of the college that Shekhar studies in. Father Ibrahim is not projected as a colonial character on a civilizing mission but rather as a postcolonial friend, philosopher and guide to Saavli who tries to commit suicide after Thakur rapes her, to Shekhar by revealing the secret of his illegitimate lineage only after his mother's death, and even by validating Thakur's confession of sorts at the end of the film by stating that repentance for one's misdeeds is penance enough. A celibate character called Mahesh also quite literally sings praises of the priest in a song-and-dance sequence that is replete with platitudes called '*Keh gaye Father Ibrahim: Baant ke khao is duniya mein, baant ke bojh uthao, jis raste me sabka sukh ho woh rasta apnao, is talim se badhkar jag me koi nahi talim, keh gaye Father Ibrahim...*' ('Share your food with others, share their burdens too, take the road to everyone's happiness, that is life's biggest lesson, taught by Father Ibrahim...'). While visuals of churches abound, they coexist with (dominant caste) Hindu religious rites and places of worship. What is striking, however, is the *bade* Thakur's presence in a temple meant for the *adivasi* community, which is seen as an honour by an *adivasi* who spots him there. It takes us back to (pre)colonial times when Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes were not allowed entry into places of religious worship reserved exclusively for 'upper' castes, which is still a reality in certain parts of India.

The dominance of 'upper' caste Indians over Scheduled Tribes manifests itself through acts of brutal sexual violence in *Izzat*; Thakur rapes Saavli on a whim when he is overcome with lust,

but considering her plea for marriage is out of the question. He must marry a woman from the same caste/class as him and therefore convinces Saavli to erase herself from his sight. *Aastha*, on the other hand, makes an attempt to visibilize the *adivasi* Other in mainstream society, although this intervention could be termed a *savarna* ('upper' caste Indian) saviour complex, which is comparable to the "white saviour complex" based on missionary models of redemption, service, or help that are anchored in colonial legacies' (Ciofalo 2019: 75). This film features the tribal community in a parallel narrative where privileged caste/ class Amar visits an annual fair to observe the nomadic Nath people and their 'interesting customs and delightful cases'. Members of the tribe voice their grievances in a temple 'because the truth would prevail as nobody can lie in a temple', following which justice is meted out by the community elder: 'Think of it as our Supreme Court', Amar laughingly explains to his wife Mansi. Amar later tries to give a voice to the fetishized *adivasis* in mainstream society, by writing a play on a case involving the Nath community that he witnessed during his visit and getting his students to perform it (as opposed to them performing an excerpt from Shakespeare's *Othello*, as it was the case in *Anbu*, *Saptapadi* and *Ratha Thilagam*). The Foucauldian concept of institutional ratification – rather lack thereof for the marginalized – is thereby observed, and the discourse of the *adivasis* is fetishized, to be replicated merely for its novelty value and strangeness in mainstream society. In addition, the Indigenous communities are repeatedly and persistently framed by the postcolonial Indian elite's hegemonic gaze. Literally so in *Aastha*; Amar is portrayed with a camera around his neck, exoticizing *adivasis* by photographing them without prior permission during the fair.



*Figures 7–8: Shekhar (the insider-outsider half-tribal) and Jhumki (the 'exotic', hypersexualized adivasi) are framed using shots and reverse shots during a song-and-dance sequence, indicating that their worlds are separate – cinematically, sartorially and ideologically.*

An annual fair is also the occasion where the point-of-view cinematic technique is used in *Izzat*, showing Shekhar watch an entire song-and-dance sequence that takes place mid-way through the film. In fact, all the *adivasi* characters except Shekhar wear clothes and accessories that differentiate them as exotic Others. One could interpret this as him assuming the dual position of an *insider-outsider*. What I mean by this is that he is an insider by birth in the *adivasi* world where he grew up and is even reminded by a community member of his *adivasi khoon* ('tribal blood'), but his almost amused scrutiny of the song-and-dance sequence featuring *adivasis* that does not include his participation even for a second turns him into an outsider. At the same time, he is an outsider in the world of the Thakurs that he himself alienates with his vow for revenge: *main unka khoon pee jaoonga* ('I will drink their blood'), as well as an insider of sorts, because the Thakur estate now lodges him in their guesthouse thanks to his friendship with Dilip. Ania Loomba's words about Othello's 'double status as an outsider and insider' (quoted in Seeff 2018: 148) bring to mind the 'cultural hybridity' that Homi Bhabha (2004) writes about, rejecting binaries of the superior colonizer and inferior colonized (the positions are of the superior Indian elite and the inferior Indian *adivasi*, in this case). This duality is literally manifested in the character of Shekhar, who is indeed part-tribal and part-Thakur. This dual heritage gives him the unique vantage point of being able to speak for the oppressed and being listened to by the elite. It is thanks to his words that the enraged oppressed *adivasis* who set out to burn down the Thakur's estate towards the end of the film change their mind; it is thanks to his actions that the furious Thakur calms down and apologizes to the *adivasis*. However, the unquestionable reign of the caste Hindu society over marginalized groups is evident from Shekhar's Thakur lineage and resemblance to Dilip that forgive his *adivasi* 'transgressions' in *Izzat*, and Amar's blatant exoticization of the *adivasi* community.

## **SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION AND AGENCY OF WOMEN IN PATRIARCHY**

The *savarna* 'saviour' lens that frames Amar in his understanding of *adivasis* in *Aastha* could be seen as an evolution of sorts from the ruthless sexual violence that tribal communities are subjected to in *Izzat*. Similarly, there is a forward progression in the agency accorded to female characters in the 1997 film vis-à-vis the 1968 film. *Izzat* features stereotypical female characters that are largely passive irrespective of their caste/class locations. On the one hand, there is a hypersexualized 'lower' caste/class woman like Kamli; on the other, there is the almost desexualized 'upper' caste/class woman like Deepa, whose role is to dutifully obey the male figures around her. Women from 'lower' castes and classes in *Izzat* are reduced to objects of sexual desire through their attire (exotic jewellery and provocatively short *saris* without a blouse or with a strapless blouse that exposes the arms and the midriff, as opposed to modestly covered-up 'upper'

caste/class female characters). There are three instances of women from marginalized groups framed by the male gaze. These women are presented not just as bodies but as mere body parts (unclothed shoulders, exposed dangling legs and a bent-over *derrière*) seen from an inviting, voyeuristic and compromising point of view. The use of such visual synecdoche reminds one of the question posed by Judith Butler: ‘What circumscribes that site as “the female body?”’ (1990: 221).

Saavli’s exposed shoulders and upper back in a remote field are espied upon by the Thakur who sneaks up on her from behind; his lascivious stares and her first oblivious and then terrified state are captured using the shot-reverse shot technique. He then goes on to undress her by unravelling her *sari*, just as Dushashana did to Draupadi, a woman married to five brothers and pawned off by them in a game of chess, in the epic *Mahabharata*. This is a visual that is deeply engraved in the Indian consciousness, and while Draupadi was saved from embarrassment, thanks to a boon from Krishna who magically turned her six-yard sari into an endless one, Saavli does not get such help because of her threefold oppression: due to her caste, class and gender. Whereas Saavli’s body is an obvious site of lust and sexual violation, Jhumki’s body becomes an object of desire and romance for Dilip, by the next generation of the Thakur clan (probably because she is played by a prominent, light-skinned actor–politician, which made her real-life identity influence her on-screen portrayal). The character is thus sexualized on account of the *savarna* gaze of her *adivasi* roots, but unlike the exaggerated manner in which a domestic worker called Gangi is framed as a nymphomaniac who relentlessly tries to seduce a celibate character called Mahesh. When he is taken to his lodging, Mahesh is told he can use all the *cheez* (‘things’) in the house even as the camera pans to Gangi cleaning the bathtub bent over in a compromising position, implying that she is literally an object for male pleasure.

The same word *cheez* is used to qualify women in *Aastha* (as the ‘most desirable thing in the world’), both by the female character Reena who pimps Mansi and by Mr Dutt, her first client. Reena praises Mansi’s body parts with verbal synecdoche (these big, dreamy eyes; these beautiful hands...); Dutt puts her on a pedestal by equating her to a goddess before getting her into bed. During foreplay, the camera focuses on her toes that he sucks on and her earlobe that he nuzzles, turning her body into a site of visual synecdoche too. The film is largely a Bildungsroman of Mansi’s sexuality, from a naive housewife (most probably a virgin at marriage) who dutifully lies on her back and lets her husband mechanically penetrate her without any foreplay, to the discovery of carnal pleasure thanks to prostitution. Mansi soon realizes that she has been subjected to marital rape and finally surprises her husband by initiating intercourse with him, which leads to him inquiring about the source of her new-found sexual vocabulary. Thus, Mansi’s image shifts from all-sacrificing, almost asexual ‘good’ Indian woman whose wifely and maternal duties keep her ‘pure’

owing to her (first forced, then wilful) selling of her body to enjoy material and carnal pleasures. Attempts to salvage her middle-class image are made with the melodramatic background music to accompany her visuals on-screen and the pathos-inducing song ‘*Tan pe lagti kaanch ki boondein*’ (‘Glass Beads Fall on My Body’) that she lip-syncs, the rain washing away her tears but failing to wash away her moral dilemma. The sexual control and sexual suspicion that the female characters are subjected to in both films could be linked to the play. Shakespeare’s female characters in *Othello*, namely Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca, are all suspected of sexual infidelity:

“He [Othello] calls her [Desdemona] a strumpet in public, and then in private (but overheard by Emilia) a whore. All of the women in the play encounter a similar accusation: Emilia is thought to have slept with Othello, and Bianca’s exact status (is she Cassio’s mistress or prostitute?) is deliberately ambiguous.” (Hampton-Reeves 2011: 94)



*Figures 9–12: Visual synecdoche can be observed in both films, with female characters reduced to mere body parts: Saavli, Jhumki and Gangi in Izzat, and Mansi in Aastha.*

Could these analyses and the film titles themselves (*izzat* means honour, while *aastha* stands for faith) get one to conclude that the 30-year gap between the two adaptations demonstrates that marginalized groups in India had increased agency at the turn of the twenty-first century, and that they continue to have agency in twenty-first-century India? Such a conclusion based only on a comparative study of *Izzat* and *Aastha* would be superficial and far from true. One has only to read a few news articles from time to time to realize that, in spite of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act that was passed in 1989, heinous crimes against the erstwhile ‘untouchables’ and *adivasi* communities are still commonplace; a recent e-book titled *No Lockdown on Caste Atrocities* (Veeraraghav 2020) includes stories such as ‘Gang raped in quarantine centre’ and ‘Death penalty for midday leave’. Similarly, while questioning the changing status of women, one must note that *Aastha* is one of the rare Hindi films of all time to show a married Hindu woman as a prostitute who is ultimately forgiven and taken back by her husband. Moreover, *Aastha* was part of a series of films on marital disharmony by filmmaker Basu Bhattacharya that had been subject to criticism and controversy for its unconventional subject matter when it was released. Making a blanket statement about Indian women’s increased agency over the passage of time would not be accurate either. First of all, this depends on the social location of the Indian woman in question; ‘high’ caste women are usually painstakingly controlled and policed to preserve their ‘purity’, whereas ‘low’ caste women are still largely seen as sexual objects; the rare non-conformist woman typically from a privileged financial class might be an exception to these norms. Despite these variations, the current Hindu nationalist BJP regime that has been in power since 2014 infantilizes women in general (the Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister – a man – recently called for police tracking of women who work outside the home) and makes decisions on their behalf (the Chief Justice of India – again, a man – reportedly asked a rape accused if he would marry his underage victim). Keeping these developments in mind, while simultaneously taking into account the increasing counteractions by various marginalized groups in the country, a true Indian anti-Othello adaptation, in all senses of the term, would be a film that would not only reject Shakespeare’s colonial authority and subvert Othello’s killing of Desdemona but also one that would assert anti-caste and feminist resistance.

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