

## ***OTHELLO* IN INDIAN ACCENTS: BROWN VOICE AND RACIAL PERFORMANCE**

Recent studies have questioned the use of Received Pronunciation in Shakespeare productions and there has been a global shift in trying to represent a more diverse array of accents in Anglophone Shakespeares. The question of accent, however, becomes more thought-provoking in Indian productions given the significance of a cosmopolitan English accent in modern day India and everything that accent might represent. A further layer of complexity is added when one considers the expectation of «a fastidious precision in the use of English language» (to use a problematic phrase by reviewer Michael Billington in his review of Iqbal Khan's 2012 RSC *Much Ado About Nothing*<sup>1</sup>) in colonial and postcolonial productions of Shakespeare in Indiathanks to the presumed superiority of English medium educations since the days of Macaulay and the Bengal Renaissance.

*Othello* adaptations are particularly useful examples in discussing how accents affect the reception and framing of Shakespeare adaptations in India. From Laurence Fishburne's African-English accent in the 1995 *Othello*, directed by Oliver Parker, to André Holland's American-English accent in the 2018 Globe production, *Othello*'s accent has frequently been used in Western productions as a signifier of his status of an "Other". In India, on the other hand, the use of English itself is steeped in multiple sites of tension; the use of English in Shakespeare adaptations adds another dimension to these problematic spaces. By examining an appropriation of *Othello* in the Bengali film industry in the 1960s and an adaptation of *Othello* in Bollywood in 2006, this essay argues that in a country which boasts twenty-two major languages and where the use of English both invites derision and is a signifier of status and education, the particular ways in which English and Shakespeare have been used in

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1 MICHAEL BILLINGTON, *The Guardian*, 2 August 2012.

*Saptapadi* and *Omkara* give us a glimpse into the problem of Shakespeare and Accentism in India and argue for a deeper evaluation of the subject of Shakespeare and Accentism globally.

Sociolinguists have demonstrated that, in practice, a listener's biases and stereotypes lead them to subconsciously attribute certain qualities to speakers. The matched-guise technique experiments conducted by Wallace Lambert and Howard Giles are perhaps the best examples of this phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> Lambert's results, for instance, proved that monolingual French and English speakers in Canada rated English speakers more favourably than French speakers even when they were listening to the same person while Giles demonstrated that Received Pronunciation (henceforth RP) received more prestige than regional English accents with «foreign accents» falling in between. These experiments and studies tend to reflect the mainstream cultural values of the part of the world the studies are conducted in but subsequent studies across the world have replicated similar results<sup>3</sup>.

In terms of doing Shakespeare, we find a comparable situation. Across the world, there is an expectation regarding how Shakespeare should sound and there have been instances where actors and audiences have taken for granted that Shakespeare is to be done in RP for it to sound suitably Shakespearean, though RP developed in the late nineteenth century and would have been foreign to Shakespeare's stage. Rob Pensalfini, to draw attention to one such instance of peculiarity, illuminates the oddity of RP being the standard in Australian productions of Shakespeare and how actors and directors automatically adopt the accent despite the accessibility and naturalness of using General Australian.

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- 2 The matched-guise technique essentially involves a single speaker adopting multiple accents being heard by listeners who are told that they are listening to multiple people. In various instances, when the listeners were told they were listening to the same person, they refused to believe it. See for instance, WALLACE E. LAMBERT, HANNAH FRANKLE and G. RICHARD TUCKER, «Judging Personality through Speech: A French-canadian Example 1», *Journal of Communication*, 16 (1966), 305-321; WALLACE E. LAMBERT and others, «Evaluational Reactions to Spoken Languages.», *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 60 (1960), 44; and HOWARD GILES and others, «The Social Meaning of RP: An Intergenerational Perspective», *Studies in the Pronunciation of English: A Commemorative Volume in Honor of AC Gimson*, (1990), 191-221.
  - 3 ROB PENSALFINI, «Not in our Own Voices: Accent and Identity in Contemporary Australian Shakespeare Performance», *Australasian Drama Studies*, (2009), 153.

Similarly, Varsha Panjwani notes that the gamut of south-Asian accents used in the RSC *Much Ado About Nothing* (2012), which would have sounded typical to many multilingual Londoners, led English reviewers to conclude that the Asian cast did not «have a firm grasp of Shakespeare’s language»<sup>4</sup>. Turning to social media, it is easy to identify the multiple ways in which this prejudice against accents is still the norm: an actor talking about auditions shared on twitter – *When I did get into one I was rejected by «voice» told I didn’t have a good enough voice for theatre and definitely would never do Shakespeare. #ShareYourRejections*<sup>5</sup> while another commentator tweets: *Worrying that so many tweets praise Andrew Scott for using his own accent as #Hamlet -people are so used to hearing Shakespeare in RP that it’s all they can associate it with. Something still wrong with the industry if people are shocked to hear Shakespeare in a «regional» accent*<sup>6</sup>.

I lay out these multiple instances of accent prejudice to provide a snapshot of the biases that listeners have towards certain accents which influence their reception of Shakespeare productions. In India, there is a certain amount of condescension towards accented English, as well as a high degree of regionalism. There is a clear north-south divide in accents, as well as the divide between rural and urban accents. In cities like Kolkata and Chennai where there are educational institutes being run by Jesuit priests and Roman Catholic nuns, there is a further refinement of accent that comes with being educated at certain institutes which produces English speakers like Shashi Tharoor who are highly regarded as “good speakers” but also looked down upon for speaking «posh».<sup>7</sup> I will

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- 4 PENSALFINI, «Not in our Own Voices: Accent and Identity in Contemporary Australian Shakespeare Performance», *Australasian Drama Studies*, (2009), 142-158. RUBEN ESPINOSA, «Stranger Shakespeare», *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 67 (2016), 51-67. VARSHA PANJWANI, «Britain, India, Shakespeare, and the Constabulary Nightwatch», *Shakespeare in the Making – Les Cahiers De La Licorne*, (2018) <http://shakespeare.edel.univ-poitiers.fr/index.php?id=1493>.
- 5 J. ANOUKA, (2018), Twitter post. 12 Sep. 2018 <https://twitter.com/JadeAnouka/status/1030522277211910144?s=09>.
- 6 CORRIGAN, B.. Twitter post, 2 April 2018, [https://twitter.com/bryony\\_corrigan/status/980184343954980864?s=09](https://twitter.com/bryony_corrigan/status/980184343954980864?s=09).
- 7 SHASHI THAROOR is an Indian MP and writer who is famous for his use of complex vocabulary: see for instance, GOPALAKRISHNAN, AMULYA, *Why we are so Charmed by Tharoor’s English* (*Times of India*, 11 February, 2018), 23 May, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/to-name-and-address/why-we-are-so-charmed-by-tharoors-english/>

therefore, use two examples of *Othello* appropriations on film in India to analyse the way accents have been used to manipulate the inherent biases of film audiences in India with regard to language and Shakespeare.

*Saptapadi* (1961) is a mainstream Bengali film structured around a performance of *Othello*, heavily influenced by the Orson Welles 1951 film, which is used as an exemplar to validate an inter-racial romance between a Hindu Bengali boy and a Christian Anglo-Indian girl<sup>8</sup>. This postcolonial film set in colonial India cites *Othello* by using cinematic visual and auditory echoes rather than by having characters speak lines from the text. There are repeated references to Welles' film: the enactment of the murder scene is closely based on the American film, for instance, as well as the whistling wind sound played during the performance. Richard Burt contends that the film «narrates a transition from postcolonial performance, in which Shakespeare serves as a kind of mimicry, to Shakespeare as international cinema»<sup>9</sup>. This, he argues, is achieved by the performance of the murder scene in *Othello* in two separate instances in the film. In the first occasion, Rina is depicted as rehearsing the scene with her English classmate, John Clayton, who is used as a foil to Krishnendu through the first half of the film. When Rina encourages John to put more feeling into his lines, we hear Krishnendu reciting the lines off-camera, and then see him delivering the lines on his balcony. I find this an interesting demonstration of an experiment mentioned in Pensalfini's article measuring the tonal range of General Australian (henceforth GA) versus RP performances of the same piece of text by four professional actors<sup>10</sup>. The experiment demonstrated that for all the participants, the tonal range of the GA versions of the speeches was greater than those for the RP version which counters the wide-ranging perception of reviewers in Australia who consider GA limited in tonal range and therefore unsuitable for dramatic verse.<sup>11</sup> In the first part

8 See PAROMITA CHAKRAVARTI, «Modernity, Postcoloniality and Othello: The Case of Saptapadi», *Remaking Shakespeare: Performance Across Media, Genres, and Cultures*, (2003), pp 39-55 for a more detailed description of the film.

9 RICHARD BURT, «All that Remains of Shakespeare in Indian Film», in *Shakespeare in Asia: Contemporary Performance*, ed. by Dennis Kennedy and Li Lan Yong (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

10 PENSALFINI, «Not in our Own Voices: Accent and Identity in Contemporary Australian Shakespeare Performance», *Australasian Drama Studies*, (2009), 152.

11 PENSALFINI, «Not in our Own Voices: Accent and Identity in Contemporary Australian Shakespeare Performance», *Australasian Drama Studies*, (2009), 150.

of the film, Krishnendu has been deliberately contrasted with the Englishman Clayton to highlight his superiority as a character. Krishnendu is a better student, a better sportsman and a better actor, and is frequently shown as not only being confident within his own cultural identity, but also equally able to inhabit the English culture. Therefore, it is implied that he can also speak Shakespeare “with more feeling”.

And yet, the second performance of the murder sequence in the film appears to directly contradict this stance and thus underlines my point about the complexity of accent and language as a marker of mainstream cultural values in India. This sequence is shot like a film clip within a film, based closely on Orson Welles’s *Othello* (1954). The direction for the murder sequence on stage has been credited to Utpal Dutt in the title sequence, consequently making this second sequence, in some way, more “authentic”. Most importantly, while Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar, the box-office superstars playing the protagonists in *Saptapadi*, voice the Shakespearean lines the first time the murder scene is enacted, in this sequence the Shakespearean lines are voiced by actors from the Shakespeareana troupe: Krishnendu’s *Othello*, in fact, is voiced by Utpal Dutt, an actor trained to speak Shakespeare in RP by a British mentor, while mimicking an American actor. This brings us back to RP being the default for an authentic Shakespeare performance which is peculiar given the earlier use of accent in the first version of this sequence. However, when we consider the purpose of the first rendition of the sequence is to point out that the postcolonial Indian character has mastered Shakespeare in his own voice in much the same way Ocampo-Guzman does while the purpose of the second version of the sequence is to foreground Shakespeare, and the relevance of *Othello* to the plot of the film, this change in accent becomes a necessary narrative function<sup>12</sup>.

*Omkaara* (2006) is a different experiment with language in the context of Indian cinema. A close adaptation of *Othello*, *Omkaara* translocates the play to the «lawless Wild West setting» of Uttar Pradesh, India<sup>13</sup>. The film seamlessly melds the Shakespearean text with Bollywood narrative and visual codes, and in doing so, replaces Shakespeare’s lan-

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12 ANTONIO OCAMPO-GUZMAN, «My Own Private Shakespeare; Or, Am I Deluding Myself?», *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*, (2006), 136.

13 STEPHEN ALTER, *Fantasies of a Bollywood Love Thief: Inside the World of Indian Moviemaking* Harcourt, London 2007, 35.

guage with rich visual metaphors. English is used in interesting ways in this film which foregrounds the rise of the Hindutva mentality in India, a situation underlined by the characters wearing western clothing and using the latest technology but resorting to Khariboli for speech instead of Hinglish or even the standardised Hindi of Bollywood films. Shakespeare's Othello is clearly an outsider, «both necessary for white Venetian security and a threat to its identity»<sup>14</sup>. He has no family, thereby making him dependent on Iago and, consequently, more vulnerable to the latter's insidious suggestions about Desdemona's possible infidelity. In *Omkaara*, however, the characters who are outsiders are Cassio/ Kesu *Firangi* and Desdemona/Dolly, as indicated by their names and the fact that they are both college-educated and literally do not speak the dialect of the other characters in the film<sup>15</sup>. Their common background and their mutual feelings of insecurity in their new situation naturally bring them closer, thereby making Iago/Langda's insinuations plausible to Othello/Omkara. This is a comment on the social milieu depicted in the film itself, a reality in many parts of India, where despite social advances such as technology and education of women, there is a sense of resentment against modernity and "Englishness," which in this case is a reference to the corrupting influence of the urban elite in India on old fashioned values such as *izzat* and *tehzeeb* [culture and etiquette].

It is important to underline however, that Dolly speaks heavily north-Indian-accented English, thus indicating that while she is English-educated, she has not lost her Indian roots and is therefore cast in a more innocent light than Kesu in her *firanginess*. This is highlighted in the sequence where Kesu is teaching her the English song «I just called to say I love you» by Stevie Wonder and she cannot hear the difference between how she pronounces «bottom of my heart» and how Kesu softens the "t" sounds in "bottom". *Firangipana* [Foreignness] is associated much more closely with Kesu and in a clearly derogatory way when

14 ANIA LOOMBA, «Shakespeare and the Possibilities of Postcolonial Performance», *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance*, (2008), 130.

15 Names have unique importance in this film. All the characters in Omkara have distinctively high-caste Hindu last names; Iago/Ishwar Tyagi's last name designates him as the uppermost sub-caste among Uttar Pradesh Brahmins. Moreover, the names have allusions to Hindu mythology which directly plays into the way the audience understands the plot and the relationship between characters. See, for instance, LALITA P. HOGAN, «The Sacred and the Profane in Omkara: Vishal Bhardwaj's Hindi Adaptation of Othello», *Image & Narrative*, 11 (2010).

Langda uses the word. Throughout the film, Keshav is known as Kesu *Firangi*. *Firangi* is a derogatory name given to *videsis* or foreigners, but it also refers to Indians who have become westernized or modernized, as modernity in India is primarily associated with foreign influence, especially by the fundamentalist advocates of *Hindutva*<sup>16</sup>. This moniker, combined with Kesu's relative inexperience and his educated background, is in keeping with Iago's disgust of the «great arithmetician... a Florentine (among Venetians)... That never set a squadron in the field / Nor the division of a battle knows» (1.1.18). When Langda is thus overlooked by the half-caste Omkara to be his successor, despite being more obviously qualified for the role and despite their closer relationship (Omi refers to Langda as his *bhai* or brother who will understand his decision), in favour of Kesu *Firangi*, his jealousy and hate towards both Omi and Kesu is inevitable and thus a powerful motivation for the chain of destruction that he initiates as opposed to the «motiveless malignity» that Coleridge had observed in Shakespeare's Iago. What is notable however, is that Kesu has a marked American accent, a hallmark of the call centre generation which is frequently blamed for the corruption of Indian culture<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, the song he teaches Dolly to sing to Omi is by Stevie Wonder, an American singer, thus underlining that his "Englishness" comes from the corrupting influence of the American west rather than the "authentic" English of Shakespeare's homeland. This distinction between different English accents therefore, communicates messages about value and culture that Indian audiences are likely to pick up on subconsciously which then makes the ending of the film perhaps even more tragic.

This essay has attempted to briefly unpick some of the issues regarding Shakespeare and accentism in India and the way accents are frequently used in productions to consciously manipulate listeners' biases for or against certain accents. It has demonstrated how Desdemona's murder scene in *Saptapadi* becomes an instance where the postcolonial protagonist accesses Shakespeare through his own identity and then im-

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16 Read JYOTIRMAYA SHARMA, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism* (Penguin Books India, 2003) for a more detailed description of Hindu nationalism and the relationship of *Hindutva* to Muslims in India.

17 See, for instance, DIVYA C. MCMILLIN. "Outsourcing Identities: Call Centres and Cultural Transformation in India." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2006, pp. 235–241.

mediately reverts to the standard RP used globally for Shakespeare thus resisting and mastering the language simultaneously as a «foreign» actor inhabiting a Shakespearean character. It has then taken up the difference in the use of English between two characters with different accents in the context of modern-day India and what their accents signify to their audiences. These examples make the case for more in-depth study on the topic of Shakespeare and accentism which could contribute further to the teaching and production of Global Shakespeares and to future Shakespeare Studies scholarship.

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## Ամփոփում

ՕԹԵԼԼՈՅ ՀՆԴԿԱԿԱՆ ՇԵՇՏՈՎ  
ՍՐՃԱԳՈՅՆ ԶԱՅՆ ԵՒ ՑԵՂԱՅԻՆ ԴԵՐԱԿԱՏԱՐՈՒԹԻՒՆ

## ՔՈՒԼ ԶԱՏՏԵՐՃԻ

Նոր ուսումնասիրութիւններ հարցականի տակ դրած են Անգլիական Ուղիղ Առողանութեան (Received Pronunciation) գործածութիւնը Շէյքսպիրի բեմադրութիւններուն մէջ: Համաշխարհային հակում մը կայ շէյքսպիրեան գործերուն մեկնաբանութիւնները ճոխացնելու անգլիախօս աշխարհի բազմազան շեշտերով: Սակայն, ներկայիս Հնդկաստանի մէջ, շեշտին հարցը աւելի գրգռիչ երեւոյթ մըն է, աշխարհաքաղաքացիական անգլերէնի շեշտին պատճառով: «Թծախնդրօրէն յստակ անգլերէնի գործածութեան» ակնկալումը բարդութեան շերտաւորում մը կ'աւելցնէ գաղութային եւ յետգաղութային հնդկական շէյքսպիրեան բեմադրութիւններուն:

Օթելլոյի պատշաճեցման տարբեր պարագաները մասնաւորապէս օգտակար օրինակներ են քննարկելու համար թէ ինչպէս շեշտերը կը պայմանաւորեն Շէյքսպիրի բեմադրութիւններուն ընկալումը Հնդկաստանի մէջ: Լորէնս Ֆիշլըրնի փորձիկեան անգլերէնի առողանութեամբ 1995ի Օթելլոյէն (Օլիվըր Փարքըրի ղեկավարութեամբ) մինչեւ Անտոն Հոլլանտի ամերիկեան անգլերէնի շեշտով 2018ի Լոնտոնի Կլոպ թատրոնին մէջ բեմադրութիւնը, Օթելլոյի շեշտը յաճախ գործածուած է իբրեւ խորհրդանիշ իր «Օտարի» հանգամանքին: