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Not a Black Moor but a Brahmin-Christian Moor: Shakespeare’s Othello in Early Postcolonial Indian Cinema

Archana Jayakumar

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In the English playwright William Shakespeare's 1603 play *The Tragedy of Othello: The Moor of Venice* (commonly known as just *Othello*) that is set in the Republic of Venice, Iago manipulates the Moorish general Othello into killing his Venetian wife Desdemona. The murder signals not only the end of their love story but also the end of the play itself. On the contrary, the black-and-white Indian film *Saptapadi* (1961, dir. Ajoy Kar) has the lead characters Krishnendu Mukherjee and Rina Brown enact the beginning of Act 5, Scene 2 where Othello kills Desdemona, which ironically ends up marking the starting point of their love story. A film adaptation of the Indian writer Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay's 1958 eponymous novel, *Saptapadi* refers to the seven steps (literally, *saptapadi*) taken by the bride and the groom in the Hindu tradition to sanctify their marriage. This Bengali-language film revolves around a seemingly improbable love story between a Bengali Hindu man and a Christian woman that is set against the backdrop of the Second World War in colonial India. The acting out of the aforementioned extract from *Othello* that lasts for less than ten minutes happens to be the inciting incident in the film, or the "disruption of equilibrium, [and] sets up a through-line for the central characters of the film, and this ensures that the characters are seen to have clear goals, or character objectives." Indeed, there is no love lost between the college students Krishnendu and Rina before they perform the scene from *Othello*; it is also during the play-acting that they are shown to have physical contact with each other for the first time, with Krishnendu placing his bare hands around Rina's neck to strangle her to death. Sadomasochistic undertones notwithstanding, they soon express their love to each other, and it is after their short-lived relational bliss that several obstacles – from Rina's father to Krishnendu's father – come their way, which lead to the separation of the lovers. The film alternates between flashbacks set in colonial Bengal (circa 1943) after both the characters have graduated from college, and events from their college days presumably a few years before that. The two parallel tracks ultimately end with the resolution of Krishnendu and Rina uniting against all odds.

Mots-clefs :

In the English playwright William Shakespeare's 1603 play *The Tragedy of Othello: The Moor of Venice* (commonly known as just *Othello*) that is set in the Republic of Venice, Iago manipulates the Moorish general Othello into killing his Venetian wife Desdemona. The murder signals not only the end of their love story but also the end of the play itself. On the contrary, the black-and-white Indian film *Saptapadi* (1961, dir. Ajoy Kar) has the

lead characters Krishnendu Mukherjee and Rina Brown enact the beginning of Act 5, Scene 2 where Othello kills Desdemona, which ironically ends up marking the starting point of their love story. A film adaptation of the Indian writer Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay's 1958 eponymous novel, *Saptapadi* refers to the seven steps (literally, *saptapadi*) taken by the bride and the groom in the Hindu tradition to sanctify their marriage. This Bengali-language film revolves around a seemingly improbable love story between a Bengali Hindu man and a Christian woman that is set against the backdrop of the Second World War in colonial India. The acting out of the aforementioned extract from *Othello* that lasts for less than ten minutes happens to be the inciting incident in the film, or the "disruption of equilibrium, [and] sets up a through-line for the central characters of the film, and this ensures that the characters are seen to have clear goals, or character objectives[1]." Indeed, there is no love lost between the college students Krishnendu and Rina before they perform the scene from *Othello*; it is also during the play-acting that they are shown to have physical contact with each other for the first time, with Krishnendu placing his bare hands around Rina's neck to strangle her to death. Sadomasochistic undertones notwithstanding, they soon express their love to each other, and it is after their short-lived relational bliss that several obstacles – from Rina's father to Krishnendu's father – come their way, which lead to the separation of the lovers. The film alternates between flashbacks set in colonial Bengal (circa 1943) after both the characters have graduated from college, and events from their college days presumably a few years before that. The two parallel tracks ultimately end with the resolution of Krishnendu and Rina uniting against all odds.

Saptapadi therefore does not attempt to recreate the entire plot of Shakespeare's *Othello* but includes only a retelling of a crucial scene from the play. It has been noted in an essay entitled "All that remains of Shakespeare in Indian film" that *Saptapadi* makes use of Shakespeare in "weakened form[2]" and more significantly, that the film "closely follows Orson Welles's film *Othello* (1954), using the same whistling on its soundtrack[3]." To these remarks, one can assert that Welles's film is probably as much as (or much less than) a starting point for *Saptapadi* as Giraldi Cinthio's 1565 story was for Shakespeare who used it as a source for *Othello*, with the addition and alteration of sub-plots as well as the introduction of some characters and their naming in an evocative fashion. Moreover, a minor sub-plot in *Saptapadi*, in turn, has gone on to serve as an inciting incident in the Bengali film *Hrid Majharey* (2014, dir. Ranjan Ghosh), which can lead us to question "the constant critical denigration of the general phenomenon of adaptation[4]" despite its widespread nature. Also, another vital question is not what "remains" of Shakespeare in Indian film, a word that alludes to a *passive* leaving behind of this colonial icon in postcolonial India. It is more pertinent to consider what Indian filmmakers *actively* choose to retain and exclude from Shakespearean plays, and the meanings that academics and critics *actively* read into them, and more importantly, the past and contemporary socio-political mores of various sections of Indian society that they end up presenting as having parallels with or oppositions to Shakespearean trajectories.

In Shakespeare's *Othello,* the titular character is a Moor, a racial identity seen as inferior (portrayed by various white and light-skinned actors around the world on stage and on screen in blackface, and more recently, by black or naturally dark-skinned actors). Othello is also a convert to Christianity (from Islam, which was and is seen as a threat to the white Christian world). He is thus a marginalised outsider, or an Other, in early modern Venice. If one considers that "the explorations of racial issues in *Othello* has made it an enabling text for racially segregated cultures and more generally for colonial and postcolonial readers, adapters and performers of Shakespeare,[5]" what is it that makes the play an enabling text to study postcolonial India? And which community is the corresponding outsider, the corresponding Other, in 1940s Bengal? First of all, one must bear in mind that India is not a society segregated on the basis of race that puts black in binary opposition to white but one that was ordered in precolonial times on the basis of *varna:* a splitting of the populace into four groups, i.e. Brahmins (priests and intellectuals), Kshatriyas (nobles and warriors), Vaishyas (traders) and Shudras (service providers). This classification was initially made on the basis of occupation, but later came to be birth-based – with Brahmins at the top of the hierarchy, followed by Kshatriyas, then Vaishyas, and finally Shudras. An ossification of this structure during the colonial period via the construction of a "caste" system (from the Portuguese word *casta*[6]) has left postcolonial India deeply divided into various official administrative categories, namely the Forward Caste (the "top" three *varnas*), the Other Backward Classes (largely Shudras) and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (the former untouchables and groups criminalised by the British, i.e. the *avarnas*, who unlike the first four groups or *savarnas,* were deemed too "low" to belong to caste Hindu society). However, *Saptapadi*'s Krishnendu is not from an *avarna* community. Nor is he a religious Other, a minority from Abrahamic faiths who live in postcolonial India, where Muslims are stereotypically seen as evil outsiders in ideological continuity with the five-hundred-year Islamic rule of India before British colonisation, and Christians are viewed as morally licentious and sexually promiscuous but at the same time could benefit from a grudgingly or secretly superior status owing to a colonial hangover.

A paradox emerges when Krishnendu is portrayed as a character born into a Brahmin family, a caste group that is at the top of the structure. Moreover, he converts to Christianity at one point during the film, which presents him as not only superior in the social ordering of precolonial India but also that of colonial India (when the film is set) and postcolonial India (when the film was made). The importance of "power relations as the most important context for interpreting texts[7]" in the fields of new historicism and cultural materialism as well as the identification of cinema as an "apparatus destined to obtain a precise ideological effect, necessary to the dominant ideology[8]" thus lead us to the tension between the Moor as the marginalised outsider in Shakespeare's *Othello* and the character of Brahmin-Christian Krishnendu as the dominant insider in *Saptapadi*. This tension will be explored in this essay through the interactions of three father figures that construct the privileged insider that I will call the "Brahmin-Christian Moor": (i) the caste Hindu Brahmin father, (ii) "Father" Krishnendu Mukherjee after his conversion to Christianity and finally, (iii) Krishnendu's role as a father saviour of Mother India during World War II.

Bloodline of caste Hindu Brahmin father

The fact that Krishnendu belongs to the Brahmin caste is revealed to the viewers about fifty minutes into the film, when about two-thirds of the film is yet to unfold. This information is provided to discerning audiences simply via his surname. Indeed, surnames are often indicative of caste affiliation in India; typical surnames from the first three rungs in the four-fold *savarna* order are undeniable markers of high social status, respectability, generational wealth, collective cultural capital, learnedness and/or even intelligence. In other words, a "high" caste surname that one inherits by birth is often a sign of (perceived) superiority and therefore domination – and, on the other hand, a surname of "low" origin denotes innate inferiority and necessary subservience. Krishnendu's surname is Mukherjee, which is the anglicised version of Mukhopadhyay. One etymological explanation points to the linking of *mukhya* (chief) and *upadhyay* (teacher), in keeping with the traditional occupation of Brahmins as priests, teachers and intellectuals; along with Banerjee (Bandopadhyay), Chatterjee (Chattopadhyay) and Ganguly (Gangopadhyay), they belong to the "highest" strata of Bengali Kulin Brahmins. The moment of revelation occurs when an off-screen narrator announces: "Krishnendu Mukherjee as Othello," just before the ten-minute performance of the excerpt during a college programme.

Two functions are served by the strategic timing of this announcement. The first is the value signalling of Brahmins as connoisseurs of "high" culture. Apart from those of English descent – like Rina Brown (an Anglo-Indian woman) who plays Desdemona and John Clayton (an Anglo-Indian/British man) who was meant to play Othello but had to be replaced by Krishnendu when he dropped out – only dominant caste groups among Indians are associated with the "superior" English language and presented as capable of doing justice to Shakespeare. Interestingly, the line-up in the college programme includes acts by multiple Indian students with dominant caste Brahmin and non-Brahmin surnames, such as Choudhary and Nandy, as well as another Mukherjee with his rendition of Rabindra Sangeet, i.e. a collection of songs by Rabindranath Tagore, a nineteenth-century Bengali Brahmin literary figure who is said to have been "influenced by Shakespeare[9]" and "served as the agent of theatrical modernity for the colonial bourgeoisie[10]." The second function of announcing Krishnendu Mukherjee as Othello – when seconds later, we see him wearing blackface, hooped earrings, a moustache, and a beard – is the deliberate construction of a distance from Krishnendu's "Brahminness." Moreover, the blackface used by a brown-skinned Indian actor could be seen as a means of joining a league of actors who are white-skinned (and therefore, seen as intrinsically superior by virtue of colour) like the US actor-director Orson Welles and the English actor-director Laurence Olivier who darkened their skin to play the titular role of Othello in screen adaptations that were released in 1951 and 1965 respectively. As for the hooped earrings and the facial hair, there is a palpable intertextuality with the manner in which the Russian singer Arnold Azrikan was styled to play Othello from 1939 to 1968 in various performances of Giuseppe Verdi's opera entitled *Otello*.

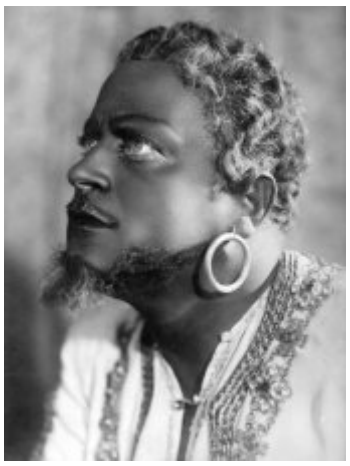

Fig. 1: Russian tenor Arnold Azrikan in Verdi's Otello *(Wikimedia Commons)*

Fig. 2: Indian actor Uttam Kumar as Krishnendu Mukherjee in his 'Othello get-up' in Saptapadi
(all images from the film are screenshots taken from: https://youtu.be/CxmnkJbzVMM)

Moreover, the "representation of the Muslim as Other has in fact been a long-term trend within the discourse of popular Hindi cinema[11]" and the beard is one of the markers used for this purpose. What is true of Hindi cinema also extends to films made in other languages in India. Thus, Krishnendu's get-up to play Othello can be seen as a way for him to not only dissociate himself from his "pure", clean-shaven, Brahmin self but also momentarily affiliate himself with the Muslim Other only while playing a murderer. Incidentally, the Muslim Other (the Islamic Ottoman Empire) was also the "general enemy" (1.3.54) of the Republic of Venice (as well as of Britain) – which in turn can be read as Krishnendu associating himself with the British coloniser. The British-Brahmin alliance was indeed significant during the colonial period and remains to this date a reason for the maintenance of the "high" status of this caste.

> The natural allies of the British became the largely conservative indigenous literati, the Brahmin pundits. In a highly stratified society, it suited the British to align with the upper castes for both moral and political authority. This may partly be explained by the fact that British society was itself largely status conscious and therefore they would naturally align themselves with the upper caste/crust of the Indian society. On the other hand, the Brahmin pundits were also more than happy to collaborate with the British masters because they had been losing their absolute authority in Indian society due

to the emergence of newfangled ideas of reformation[12].

This British-Brahmin alliance comes to the fore explicitly in *Saptapadi*, when Krishnendu goes to meet Rina's British father to ask for her hand in marriage. "And so you're Mukherjee? Well, we've got a lot of Mukherjees in our firm," he asserts to Krishnendu. As a matter of fact, Brahmins – as well as non-Brahmin dominant caste groups – were preferred for administrative jobs in colonial times, an important reason being their literacy rate (especially their fluency in the English language), which itself depended on their precolonial status as well privileges accorded to these groups in British India. As per the 1931 census, "average Muslim literacy (6.4 per cent) was below Hindu literacy (8.4 per cent)[13]." Much wider was the difference in literacy rate among Hindus: "Brahmans [alternative spelling for Brahmins] at the upper end of the caste hierarchy averaged 33 per cent, while depressed classes [the former name for the *avarna* groups] averaged 1.6 per cent[14]." These generational privileges – or the absence of them – is why the nomenclature of the "Hindu" as an umbrella category that includes both *savarna* as well as *avarna* groups remains contentious; certain *avarna* groups as well as some Shudras among *savarnas* do not identify as Hindus, a prominent example being the Shudra writer Kancha Illiah Shepherd who made waves with his 2018 book entitled *Why I am Not a Hindu.*

However, it must be noted that Krishnendu does not profess any sense of belonging to his caste group nor does he proclaim caste pride of any sort. On the contrary, he repeatedly declares that caste and religion mean nothing to him, unlike his staunch Brahmin father who is not only depicted as devout in his faith but also uncompromising in matters of caste. Nonetheless, even if one claims to be an atheist or to not "believe" in caste, the structure is such that members of privileged caste groups – whether progressive like Krishnendu or conservative like his father – will continue to benefit from an unfair structure, and marginalised groups will continue to be at the receiving end, until the entire institution is done away with. In B.R. Ambedkar's words from *The Annihilation of Caste,* a 1936 speech that remained undelivered due to its revolutionary critique of Hinduism: "[…] it is useless to make a distinction between the secular Brahmins and priestly Brahmins. Both are kith and kin. They are two arms of the same body, and one is bound to fight for the existence of the other[15]."

Saptapadi shows the priestly Brahmin (Krishnendu's father) in traditional attire typically meant for Brahmins, praying to an idol of the goddess Kali. His belief in caste supremacy is highlighted through multiple imposing low angle shots that highlight his *janeu*, a sacred white thread that is meant to be worn across the shoulder exclusively by men from Brahmin caste groups and a few other non-Brahmin dominant caste groups. As for Krishnendu (the secular Brahmin), the manner in which he is styled throughout the film makes it impossible to ascertain if he wears a *janeu* as well. Krishnendu's father is also shown to espouse the age-old superstition that crossing the seas will lead to a loss of one's caste, which is why several Brahmins did not travel abroad in the past due to the fear of being excommunicated. His attitude is in opposition to Krishnendu's worldview as well as his comparatively liberal wife's wish for

their son Krishnendu to work as a doctor abroad. Also, unlike Brabantio who expressed displeasure at his daughter Desdemona's marriage to Othello in Shakespeare's text, it is Krishnendu's father who is against his son's marriage to Rina to avoid the loss of his caste and excommunication, and even emotionally blackmails Rina into rejecting Krishnendu.

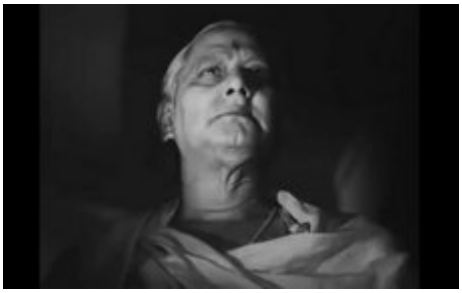

Fig. 3: Krishnendu's father is pictured in a low angle shot that emphasises markers of religion and caste supremacy, notably his janeu *or sacred white thread that is worn across his left shoulder*

"Father" Mukherjee after conversion to Christianity

As for Rina's father, his only condition for their marriage is Krishnendu's conversion to Christianity – an idea that initially horrifies Rina, who is shown to be extremely religious in her younger years as a college student. She is pictured wearing a Christian cross pendant on a chain when she and Krishnendu are hostile towards each other during their college days. She also wears it when she plays Desdemona on her deathbed (with the cross pendant on a pearl chain in this sequence, recalling Othello's line: "like the base Judean, threw a pearl away; richer than all his tribe," 5.2.390), and Rina continues to wear it after she and Krishnendu fall in love with each other. That Christianity was vital to her identity, and would go on to have an important presence in the film, is conveyed to the audience through alternating shots and reverse shots of Rina (who is shown sitting on a table) and Krishnendu (seated on a chair next to her). The flabbergasted Rina is shown quite literally as "one level above" the flippant Krishnendu when she asks him how he could even think of leaving his faith, multiple close-ups emphasising her shock, even as he dismisses her anguish by insisting that mankind is the only religion he believes in. This is when it becomes evident that one of the opening sequences of the film, a flashback portraying Krishnendu in a Christian priest's robes, separated from Rina and the two of them meeting owing to a mere coincidence, could be read as a foreshadowing device of his religious conversion.

Nonetheless, if the figures of the staunch Christian (Rina) and the staunch Brahmin (Krishnendu's father) whose ideologies seem to clash in over-the-shoulder shots during their only conversation in the film, their markers of religiosity asserting their respective faiths, the climax sees a shattering of both of their belief systems. About twenty minutes before the film ends, Krishnendu is shown reading a letter in which his father confesses that he indeed blackmailed Rina, and asks for his son's forgiveness for having been an obstruction to their marriage: "I have learnt from her that humanity is above

religion." In a similar vein, Rina reveals to Krishnendu (and to us, the film's spectators) that she is the progeny of a rape committed by Brown on the "housemaid" who lives with them; Rina also explains that she herself learnt about this secret when her father laughed at her wish to become a nun after her separation from Krishnendu: "You have no religion. Do you know who your mother is?" One can also infer that Rina's mother is of a "low" caste, in whose family "seven generations don't know who their fathers are." Brown tries to shoot Rina when she threatens to make the information public, and it is Rina's mother whom he ultimately ends up killing – not as an Othello who kills the Desdemona he loved "not wisely but too well" (5.2.387), but as an Iago figure. In fact, the shades of Iago in Rina's father extend to his conditional approval of her marriage to Krishnendu; Rina divulges to Krishnendu that Brown couldn't bring himself to kill her when she was a baby and hence tried to "dump his sins on Krishnendu by allowing them to get married."

It is worth mentioning in this context Rina's father's motivations to get Krishnendu to convert can be seen as the coloniser's additional role as Christian missionary, although the British were not as singular about religious conversion in the Indian subcontinent and were more focussed on the extraction of riches from the "jewel in the crown" through highly exploitative means. The attitude they adopted (conversion through hegemony) was in stark contrast to the Catholic Jesuit Portuguese missionaries (forced conversions through domination); the latter are known to have even administered punishments as harsh as burning Indians alive for heresy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As a matter of fact, the actions of the Portuguese got the French philosopher Voltaire to note: *Goa est malheureusement célèbre par son inquisition, également contraire à l'humanité et au commerce. Les moines portugais firent accroire que le peuple adorait le diable, et ce sont eux qui l'ont servi*[16]. (Proposed translation: Unfortunately, Goa is infamous for its inquisition that was opposed to humanity as well as trade. The Portuguese monks tricked us into believing that the Indians worship the devil, while it is they who served him.) As for Krishnendu, his immediate acquiescence to adopt Christianity probably stems from a mix of various reasons: his character did not really care for religion, wanted to marry Rina at all costs and knew that the marriage was contingent on his conversion, and finally, he simply knew that he would always enjoy the status of the caste that he was born into.

This is because the advantages or disadvantages owing to one's caste location continue to accrue even after conversion to Christianity or even Islam for that matter since the construct of caste continues to be a cultural by-product in India. "Reverend Mukherjee" thus enjoys the title of a Christian priest and the status of his Brahmin surname, two powerful and prestigious identities that relate him not only to the clergy of the coloniser but also the clergy of the colonised. Therefore, the moral tug-of-war between the Brahmin (Krishnendu's father) and the former Christian (Rina) ends with the former adopting a more liberal posture and the latter developing a hatred for the very word "God"; we are then left with the Brahmin-Christian (Krishnendu) assuming the hybrid role of "Reverend Mukherjee," as one of the minor characters refers to him. Contrary to Shakespeare's play where Othello was seen – and saw himself – as the Other even after his conversion to Christianity, and had to kill the "malignant and […] turbaned Turk"

(5.2.396) within himself after he murders Desdemona, the conversion in *Saptapadi* leads not to confusion but to two-fold privilege. It is noteworthy that Krishnendu's conversion is not an isolated case but can be read as a continuation of a historical occurrence of mass conversions during the mid-nineteenth century when "the Christian missionaries became very powerful in Bengal and were converting Hindus in large numbers to Christianity[17]." His prestige in both the Christian world and the Hindu-Brahmin world is no anomaly either: "This form of Christianity in India itself acquired its Brahmanical flavour as the result of primarily two complementary movements: the conversion of upper-caste elites in urban settings, […] and the adoption of inculturation into Hindu ways of life [...][18]."

It is thanks to this avatar of Christianity identified to have a Brahmanical flavour that we can understand the coexistence of images from both faiths in Krishnendu's austere room in the medical camp where he works as a doctor. Pictures of Jesus Christ hang on the walls of his room, along with those of eighteenth and nineteenth century Bengali religious leaders and socio-political reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Narendranath Dutta (popularly known as Swami Vivekananda). Raja Ram Mohan Roy is one of the founders of the Brahmo Samaj, which has been identified as an attempt "to reform Hinduism in the light of post-Enlightenment rationalism[19]"; he is also associated with the abolition of Sati, a tradition of burning widows alive on their dead husband's pyres. The presence of Ram Mohan Roy's picture in Krishnendu's room could be inferred as an indication of Krishnendu's own progressive attitude, and as a clue that his Desdemona (Rina) will not die in the resolution stage of the film. As for the popular figure of Vivekananda, he has expressed conflicting views on caste. While on the one hand, he has stated that "modern caste distinction is a barrier to India's progress[20]," he has also asserted: "I have seen castes in almost every country in the world, but nowhere is their plan and purpose so glorious as here [India]. If caste is thus unavoidable, I would rather have a caste of purity and culture and self-sacrifice, than a caste of dollars[21]." Such duality can be seen in Krishnendu's character as well, who retains his Brahmin surname (and therefore his Brahmin privileges) even after conversion.

The coexistence of his Hindu-Brahmin and the Christian identities come to the fore visually when Krishnendu writes a letter to his father informing him of his decision to convert. His father's fury is expressed through shots (of himself) and reverse shots of an idol of the Goddess Kali of whom we see close-ups and extreme close-ups, as we hear the off-screen sounds of temple bells and ritual proceedings building up to a crescendo. We then witness his ultimate helplessness in the face of his son's decision, when anger turns to a pained expression, and the frenzied cacophony of the temple sounds is smoothly replaced by an evenly-paced ringing of a church bell. The change in audio is accompanied by a shift in video, with a seemingly-calculated lingering screen dissolve of Kali's statue transitioning to an image of a church – the layering of the visuals in Fig. 5 defining Krishnendu's hybridity. The camera first frames the spires with foliage, suggesting the tranquil atmosphere (in contrast to the pandemonium in the previous images that echo the pandemonium in Krishnendu's father's head) and then pans down

and across the entire length and breadth of the church. We then see Krishnendu silently contemplate the monument for a few seconds, followed by a tracking shot of him walking into the church, his decision to adopt Christianity resolute.

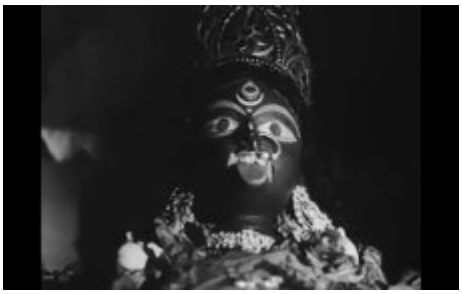

Fig. 4, 5, 6: A close-up of a statue of the Goddess Kali slowly dissolves into a visual of a church

Father saviour of the mother country

Apart from the aforementioned sequence, editing techniques such as screen dissolves and superimpositions are used at various strategic moments throughout the film, bringing to mind the oft-quoted idea that "a film is written three times: once as a script, again when the script is brought to life on location with the cast and crew, and a third time when the picture is finally edited into the finished product[22]." To start with, the establishing shot frames a lone man riding a bicycle in the distance which complements the accompanying soothing instrumental background music. The narrow, winding forest path that he is on is flanked by dense trees and lush greenery that soon dissolve into a contrasting visual of several parked jeeps, followed by another dissolve to show us young soldiers practising their drills. In fact, the first on-screen diegetic sound is that of drill commands, hinting at the centrality of war in the plot of the film. This foreshadowing is confirmed in the very next shot of a military aircraft taking off, after which we have a worm's eye view shot of multiple aircrafts in a military formation. The superimposition of "1943" in a large font in the centre of the frame indicates that the

war in question is World War II. Japan, who was part of the Axis forces, bombed parts of Bengal during the war. This is because the British had undemocratically involved Indian soldiers to fight on the side of the Allies, thereby making India a target for the opposition. As a matter of fact, the Indian army was "a key resource that allowed Britain to punch above its weight is World War II[23]" although its contribution in this war has been largely ignored and downplayed:

> The Indian army had raised, trained and deployed some 2.5 million men. Even at the time, this was recognised as the largest volunteer army in history. Nearly 90,000 of these men were killed or maimed. Many more millions were pulled into the vortex of the Second World War – as industrial, agricultural and military labour. […] The human toll on the Indian home front must be counted in millions. And yet, the story of India's war is only dimly remembered[24].

Both Krishnendu and Rina provide different forms of military labour in the film. Krishnendu works as a military doctor while Rina's role remains ambiguous; we only see her driving a jeep in uniform and a minor character simply refers to her as a member of the "military personnel." Krishnendu's profession is established merely three minutes into the film, not too long after the establishing shot. British officers driving a jeep and singing the song *She'll be coming 'round the mountain* – that is incidentally inspired by the Christian hymn *When the chariot comes* – take a breather to greet Krishnendu who is on his bicycle with a "Good morning, doc!" This shot is immediately followed by two bare-chested, *dhoti*-clad Indian men riding bullock carts loaded with hay, an L-cut creating an unsettling effect because the audio of the song sung by the colonisers accompanies visuals of the marginalised among the colonised. Krishnendu (a Bengali-speaking and English-speaking Brahmin-Christian doctor on his bicycle, wearing the garb of a Christian priest) thus can be read as an intermediary figure between the British (in their jeep, a symbol of modernity and flaunting their English, a symbol of their "civility") and the common Indian man (Bengali-speaking, and riding bullock carts bare-chested, symbols of their "backwardness").

I would argue that Krishnendu bears what could be called the "Brahmin-Christian white man's burden"; nevertheless, his is not a civilising mission but rather one that portrays him as the ultimate saviour. As a medical doctor, he is a saviour of his multiple Indian patients who bow before him reverentially with their palms pressed together as though he were an incarnation of the divine. One of his patients also has a surname indicative in all likelihood of a "low" caste group, whereas one of his assistants has a typically Muslim name – suggesting that the Brahmin-Christian doctor is projected as a benefactor of religious minority groups as well as oppressed caste groups in colonial Bengal. Secondly, he "saves" Rina by agreeing to her father's condition to convert to Christianity in order to marry her, and later saves her from the "blasphemy" she was about to commit by attempting to shoot at a picture of Jesus Christ in Krishnendu's room. Finally, he is a saviour figure for his country as a Brahmin-Christian doctor: i.e. a

saviour of British India and their bid to win World War II by working in military field hospitals, and a saviour of soon-to-be independent India and its injured soldiers and civilians; it had become clear by the early 1940s that the British would have to grant full freedom to India soon after the war. Krishnendu's call-to-action comes in the form of a telegram from another Christian priest signalling a lack of doctors, just after we see a barrage of images of war-torn terrain, injured soldiers, military automobiles and aircrafts, bomb explosions as well as newspaper headlines superimposed on each other. The sound is both on-screen and off-screen, diegetic and extra-diegetic, and these images are further superimposed with posters that read "Aid the Wounded," "War Needs You," and "War Needs Doctors."

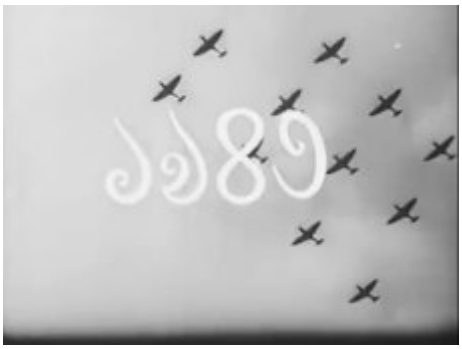

Fig. 7: One of the opening shots that superimposes the year 1943 (in Bengali) on a low-angle shot of military planes

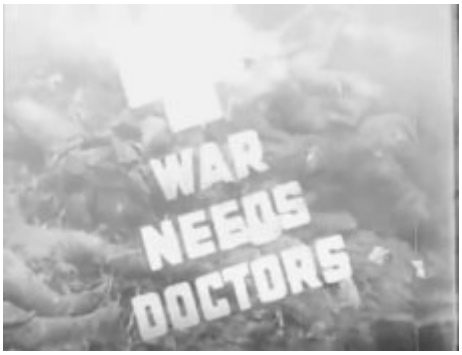

Fig. 8: A poster calling for help from doctors is layered on war-torn terrain

The India that required saving has been represented as a virgin mother and goddess figure – Mother India in English, Bharat Mata in Hindi – and fits into a global trend of the nation personified "as a *woman* (Marianne, Bharat Mata, Britannia, etc.: a silent figure like the Mother of god) representing an *idea.* It is the idea thought out about the Founding Father(s). This idea or concept installs a gender order […][25]." It is this very gender order that dictates the difference between the ideal roles of the Indian man and the Indian woman, as well as the gaps between the roles of the Indian woman (typically Hindu) and the non-Indian woman. "In Indian nationalist discourses, while the home is presided over by the woman-as-mother, the nation-as-home is presided over by her archetype, Bharat Mata, a nationalist icon […] who also embodies the difference of Indian spirituality and tradition[26]." However, Rina is not the archetypal Indian woman

(expected to take care of the hearth while the man/men of the house went to war) but an Anglo-Indian, i.e. of mixed British and Indian descent. As for the freedom accorded to Rina, there are upsides and downsides to it in the Indian context. The agency of Anglo-Indian women is amply evidenced below:

> The prominence of Anglo-Indian women in paid employment was attributed in part to their ability to work alongside men. Through their ability to mix with men both socially and at work, and through their ability to choose whom to marry, Anglo-Indian women were seen and saw themselves as more Western and more emancipated than other Indian women[27].

As for the downside, it is rather evident to discerning audiences that only a progressive man like Krishnendu (who, whether as an atheist or after conversion to Christianity, remains rational in thought) would "accept" the progeny of a "low" caste mother and a criminal father (Rina's father is ultimately jailed for having killed her mother). Rina also stands in stark opposition to Bharat Mata's depiction as a traditional Indian woman wearing a *sari*, a crown and ample gold jewellery. She is often shown wearing skirts, blouses and dresses, not to forget the cross pendant she is shown to wear during her college days. More significantly, Rina is brought in an unconscious state provoked by an overdose of alcohol to the medical facility that is under Krishnendu in a flashback sequence that plays out about ten minutes into the film. It must be noted that apart from skin-revealing "Western" outfits and cigarettes, alcohol is often used in Indian cinema as a "device for distinguishing the 'vamp', the 'Western' or 'Westernised' woman from the 'Indian' woman28." Rina's identity is kept hidden from both the audience and from Krishnendu at first in this sequence, and Krishnendu's initial attitude towards the "fallen" drunk woman who lies on a bed on her back, her face away from him, suggests irritation and contempt. After he splashes water on her rather vigorously, Krishnendu follows up it with a domineering: "Come on, wake up!", indicating indeed that only a "Western" or "Westernised" woman – and therefore a woman who speaks English and not an Indian language – would find herself in such an embarrassing position. On the contrary, his decision to "save" her in spite of all these factors can lead us to assert that by saving Rina, Krishnendu saves a part of his progressive persona/self.

Fig. 9: Mother India is depicted as a virgin/goddess figure who embodies the essence of Indian womanhood (Wikimedia Commons)

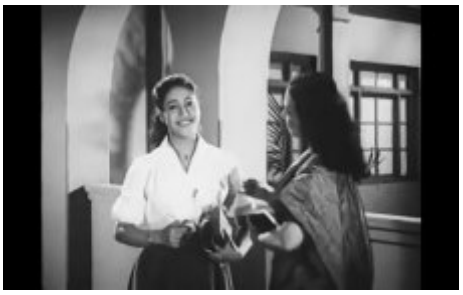

Fig. 10: Rina wears "Western" clothes and a Christian cross unlike her Indian classmate who wears a sari

Conclusion

This three-part analysis of Krishnendu as upholding the roles of multiple father figures – linked to caste supremacy, religious dominance and nationalistic fervour – leaves us with the following questions: Why does this "progressive" character who balks at the purity-pollution binary in caste codes related to crossing the seas and intermarriage retain his Brahmin surname? Is his conversion to Christianity simply the only solution to marry his lady love, a way of rebelling against his caste-supremacist father, or a means to be respected by both the British colonisers and the colonised Indians? And finally, considering that his trajectory is suggested as one that could bear parallels with the trajectory of the character of Othello, why could he not have belonged to a historically subjugated "lower" caste group or the marginalised Muslim community that would go on to suffer when British India would be divided (into the nations of India, Pakistan, and later, Bangladesh) on religious lines? The answer to the first question can be found in the example of a figure who inspires Krishnendu, namely Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), who "though he himself preached the gospel of equality, never dared to give up his sacred thread nor did he personally transgress the codes of caste[29]." Unlike Roy, it is suggested that Krishnendu will indeed break caste conventions by having an intermarriage with Rina in the denouement of *Saptapadi*'s plot, but there is still no indication of him wearing a *janeu* (or not) or crossing the seas to go abroad (or not). And we could suppose that by giving up his Brahmin surname (for a Christian one), he would lose social status and respectability in the "high" caste echelons of Bengali Hindu society. . As for the next two questions, it is probably because whether Christian converts or not, the *bhadralok* (Bengali Brahmins and a couple of other non-Brahmin dominant caste groups) "have exercised a virtually uncontested social dominance that is rather unique, even in a country where the reproduction of power politics is anything but uncommon[30]."

Finally, considering that *Saptapadi* is set in colonial Bengal circa 1940, what can one say about caste supremacy and *bhadralok* hegemony in the twenty-first century? Have they somehow dissipated to give way to a more egalitarian society? This question will have to be answered in the negative because on the one hand, "West Bengal, unlike other

regions of India, has not experienced major-caste based movements since 1947 [the year that India became independent of British rule][31]" and on the other, "the political culture of postcolonial West Bengal has tended to make all talk of caste a taboo[32]." These attitudes of caste supremacy and caste denial can be observed in the 2014 Bengali film *Hrid Majharey* that also bears allusions to *Othello*, along with heritages from *Saptapadi.* First of all, the characters Abhijit (Othello) and Debjani (Desdemona) are shown watching a DVD of *Saptapadi*, more specifically, the scene where Krishnendu as Othello kills Rina as Desdemona. However, unlike Krishnendu's anglicised Brahmin surname Mukherjee, Abhijit proudly aligns his identity to his Brahmin surname of Mukhopadhyay, the pre-anglicised version of Mukherjee – indicating a return to the "golden" precolonial past that is a goal of post-2014 right-wing nationalism in India. More importantly, Abhijit is poles apart from the "progressive" persona/self of Krishnendu who accepts a "low" caste Anglo-Indian woman despite her not fitting into the shoes of the quintessential Indian woman. Although Abhijit's murder of Debjani – who is an orphan (i.e. of unknown caste) brought up by the "missionaries of charity" – is shown to be an accident, previous sequences in the film depict him visualising her walking to her death into the sea. It is therefore not *Saptapadi* with Krishnendu as its Brahmin-Christian Moor or *Hrid Majharey* with Abhijit as its (covertly) caste-supremacist Brahmin Moor who reflect the true marginalisation of "low" caste groups or religious minorities in West Bengal, and in India as a whole, but cinema that would frame its Moor as belonging to these very oppressed, sidelined and vilified communities.

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