



Shakespeare, Assamese Cinema, And Hemanta Kr Das' *Othello*: A Critical Examination Of Cultural Adaptation And Identity

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Abstract

This paper explores the multifaceted relationship between William Shakespeare's literary influence and the evolution of Assamese cinema, with specific emphasis on Hemanta Kr Das' film *Othello* (2014). It investigates how Shakespeare's plays have been culturally appropriated, adapted, and reinterpreted within the socio-political landscapes of Assam. The study examines the historical trajectory of Shakespeare's influence in Assamese literature, theatre, and film, analyzing early adaptation efforts, the role of pioneering playwrights and filmmakers, and the complex politics of identity and otherness embedded within these works. Through a detailed case study of Das' *Othello* (2014), the paper interrogates themes of racial and cultural marginalization, societal stratification, and the fluid boundaries of cultural authenticity. The analysis situates these adaptations within theoretical frameworks of cultural appropriation, hybridity, and postcolonial identity, illustrating how regional narratives reconfigure universal themes to address local realities. This research paper focuses on the enduring relevance of Shakespeare's global motifs in regional contexts and highlights the transformative potential of cultural adaptation in shaping notions of identity, belonging, and resistance.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Assamese cinema, adaptation, cultural appropriation, identity

Introduction

The year 1826 marked a significant turning point in Assam's history with the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo, which heralded the beginning of British colonial rule. This political transformation initiated a profound cultural awakening, exposing Assamese society to Western literary traditions, notably the works of William Shakespeare. As Assamese society grappled with colonial influences, the question of cultural identity and representation became central to its artistic expressions. The dissemination of Shakespearean plays through translation, adaptation, and performance became an integral part of this cultural negotiation.

The late nineteenth century witnessed a burgeoning interest among educated Assamese youth in Western literature, especially Shakespeare, which had already permeated Bengali literature and theatre. This period saw the emergence of Assamese dramatists and playwrights who sought to incorporate Shakespearean motifs into local narratives, thereby forging a unique cultural synthesis. This paper examines this historical process, focusing on the adaptation of Shakespeare's plays into Assamese theatre and cinema, with particular attention to Hemanta Kr Das' film *Othello* (2014). It critically analyses how these adaptations serve as sites of cultural negotiation, identity politics, and artistic innovation.

Historical Curve of Shakespeare in Assamese Literature and Theatre

The initial engagement of Assamese writers with Shakespeare was characterized by a process of adaptation rather than strict translation. The pioneering efforts of four young Assamese men—Ratnadhari Borua, Gunanjan Borua, Ghanashyam Borua, and Ramakanta Borkakoti—who studied in Calcutta, exemplify this phase. Their adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors* into *Bhrama Ranga* (1888) marked a significant milestone, not only as the first full-scale Shakespearean adaptation in Assamese but also as an act of cultural localization. This adaptation was characterized by a conscious deviation from literal translation, blending Shakespearean dramatic techniques with local idioms, settings, and characters. Namrata Pathak, in her study of Assamese theatre, underscores that *Bhrama Ranga* exemplifies a hybrid form—emulating Shakespeare while infusing it with native sensibilities. The play's use of a local venue and adaptation of characters created a culturally resonant performance that bridged Western theatrical forms with Assamese cultural expressions. The influence of Shakespeare extended beyond translation into the realm of modern Assamese drama, particularly through the works of Gunabhiram Barua's *Ram Navami*. This play reflects the rationalist and reformist ideas inspired by Bengal's Vidyasagar, incorporating elements of Shakespearean and Senecan dramaturgy, notably in its use of subplots and character complexities. Such adaptations signified a shift towards a more modern, critical, and socially conscious form of drama.

Two prominent figures—Lakshminath Bezborua and Padmanath Gohain Barua—played pivotal roles in integrating Shakespearean dramaturgy into Assamese theatre. Bezborua's *Chakradhwaj Sinha* and Gohain Barua's *Lachit Borphukan* showcase characters modelled after Shakespearean archetypes, such as Falstaff and the Shakespearean fool, respectively. These characters exemplify the Assamese playwrights' ability to adapt Shakespearean characterization to local contexts, thus making the themes more relatable to Assamese audiences.

Numerous playwrights engaged with Shakespeare through literal translation or adaptation of individual plays, including Durgeswar Sarma's *Chandravati (As You Like It)*, Padmadhar Chaliha's *Lila (Romeo and Juliet)*, and Asru Tirtha's *The Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear*. These works reflect an ongoing dialogue between Western and Assamese theatrical traditions, with local themes and characters reinterpreted within the framework of Shakespearean narrative structures.

The influence of Shakespeare in Assam extended into mass media, notably radio. Adaptations of *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Julius Caesar* by Phani Talukdar and Narayan Bezborua gained widespread popularity through All India Radio, serving as accessible portals for Shakespeare's themes among the Assamese populace. In the literary domain, novelists like Rajani Kanta Bordoloi drew inspiration from Shakespeare's motifs, producing works such as *Manomati* and *Miri Jiari*, which explore themes of love, tragedy, and societal conflict. The adaptation and reinterpretation of Shakespeare's themes continue to influence contemporary Assamese literature and arts, exemplified by young playwright Hillol Kumar Pathak's *King Lear*, set in an Assamese village, where Shakespeare's themes are embedded within local socio-economic realities.

The Framework of Assamese Cinema: Origins and Developments

Assamese cinema's inception can be traced to Jyotiprasad Agarwala's *Jyomoti* (1935), which marked the first attempt to depict Assamese history and culture through film. Agarwala sought to use cinema as a tool for cultural emancipation, drawing from local legends and histories to foster a sense of identity and pride. His adaptation of Lakshminath Bezbaruah's play *Jyomoti Konwari* articulated themes of sacrifice and resilience, resonating with a society in the throes of colonial modernity. Agarwala's *Jyomoti* exemplifies how regional cinema can serve as a vehicle for cultural assertion and identity formation. Despite technological and infrastructural challenges—highlighted by filmmakers like Gautam Bora—the industry has continued to evolve, incorporating social issues, historical narratives, and modernist aesthetics.

Cultural Appropriation and Reinterpretation: Theoretical Perspectives

The adaptation of Shakespeare's works within Assamese cultural contexts raises important questions about cultural appropriation, authenticity, and hybridity. Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation emphasizes that adaptation is inherently interpretive, involving recontextualization rather than mere replication. In the Assamese context, adapting Shakespeare involves engaging with local social realities—ethnic tensions, caste dynamics, gender issues—while drawing on universal themes such as

love, betrayal, and identity. Cultural appropriation debates focus on issues of power, authenticity, and representation. Critics argue that adaptations risk superficial borrowing or misrepresentation; however, others see them as acts of intercultural dialogue that foster mutual understanding and cultural resilience.

Hemanta Kr Das' *Othello*: Reimagining Otherness and Identity Politics

The 2014 Assamese film *Othello* by Hemanta Kr Das stands as a compelling case study in the adaptation of Shakespeare. Das' *Othello* reinterprets the original play's themes of race, otherness, and betrayal within the socio-political fabric of Assam. Unlike Shakespeare's Venetian setting, where Othello's external race marks him as an outsider, Das situates his narrative in Assam, where social stratification and ethnic identities serve as the markers of otherness.

Thematic Reinterpretation

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, the protagonist's blackness and foreignness evoke racial prejudice, ultimately leading to tragedy. Das' adaptation replaces Othello's racial identity with regional markers—Mun, a Muslim auto rickshaw driver with leukoderma, and Bankim, a Bengali outsider and former revolutionary. These characters embody marginalized identities—ethnic, religious, and physical—that challenge societal norms and provoke questions about belonging. The film's narrative explores the societal construction of Otherness, emphasizing that marginalization is not solely rooted in race but also in cultural, religious, and socio-economic differences. The character of Mun, whose auto rickshaw is named "Othello", symbolizes the societal rejection of physical and cultural difference. His rejection by family and society echoes Shakespeare's themes of jealousy, trust, and betrayal but within a distinctly Assamese context of ethnic tension and social stratification.

The Politics of Identity

Das' *Othello* critically examines how identity is socially constructed and manipulated. The film interrogates the politics of exclusion and the stereotypes that define who is considered an outsider. The dual narrative of Mun and Bankim highlights intersecting layers of alienation—racial, religious, and class-based—reflecting Assam's complex ethnic mosaic. The film also addresses gender dynamics, paralleling Desdemona's defiance of societal constraints with Tina's survival as a call girl supporting her family. Both women embody resistance to societal expectations, echoing Shakespeare's exploration of female agency and societal judgment.

Theoretical Implications: Cultural Hybridity and Postcolonial Identity

Das' *Othello* exemplifies a form of cultural hybridity—where Shakespeare's universal themes are reconfigured within local socio-political realities. This process aligns with Homi Bhabha's notions of the "third space," where cultural translation produces new, hybrid identities that resist fixed notions of authenticity. The film becomes a site where global literary motifs are woven into regional narratives, fostering dialogue between colonial legacies and indigenous realities. Furthermore, the film's critique of

racial and cultural hierarchies resonates with postcolonial theories that challenge colonial representations and advocate for indigenous voices. By reimagining Othello as a marginalized Assamese figure, Das asserts the universality of the play's themes while asserting regional agency.

Characters as Cultural Archetypes: From Shakespeare to Assamese Cinema

The adaptation of Shakespearean characters in Assamese works exemplifies how archetypes are reinterpreted to reflect local realities. For instance, Falstaff's roguishness finds expression in characters like Padmanath Gohain Barua's *Lachit Borphukan*, while the Shakespearean fool's wit and wisdom resonate in characters like Jeevon in *Aparoopo*. These adaptations serve to localize universal human traits, making them accessible and relevant to Assamese audiences. In *Baibhav: A Scam in Verse*, protagonist Samiran Choudhury embodies Hamlet's internal conflict and existential angst, illustrating how Shakespeare's psychological depth informs contemporary Assamese character studies. Similarly, Rohit in Munin Barua's *Daag* grapples with jealousy and moral decay akin to Iago, highlighting how Shakespearean themes of duplicity and human duality transcend cultural boundaries.

Shakespeare's portrayal of women—such as Desdemona—has inspired Assamese characters who challenge societal norms. Tina's character in Das' *Othello* and other similar figures embody female agency amid patriarchal constraints. These characters highlight ongoing struggles around gender, sexuality, and societal judgment, providing a nuanced understanding of marginalized voices within regional narratives.

Conclusion

The influence of Shakespeare on Assamese theatre and cinema exemplifies a dynamic process of cultural adaptation, where universal themes are reconfigured within local socio-political contexts. From early translations and adaptations to Hemanta Kr Das' *Othello*, Assamese artists have engaged in a continuous dialogue with Western literary traditions, forging a regional voice that dialogues with global narratives. Das' *Othello* exemplifies how adaptation can serve as a critique of societal hierarchies, a reflection of identity politics, and a tool for cultural resilience. It underscores the capacity of regional art forms to reinterpret and reimagine classic works, fostering a hybrid cultural identity rooted in local realities yet resonant with universal human experiences. In the broader context, this ongoing engagement affirms Shakespeare's status as a global playwright whose themes transcend borders, while also emphasizing the importance of regional narratives in shaping postcolonial identity and cultural sovereignty. Future scholarship must continue to explore these intersections, ensuring that the dialogue between global and local continues to enrich both.

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