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GENDER AND POWER IN THE FILM *OMKARA*, AN ADAPTATION OF
SHAKESPEARE'S *OTHELLO*

Dr. Aloysius Sebastian

Assistant Professor

Department of English and Modern European Languages,
University of Allahabad

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omakara*, a Bollywood film adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, has accomplished cultural adaptation and transcreation by portraying the whole action in the context of politics and mafia in contemporary India rather than the monarchical and military scenario of Shakespeare's time as seen in the play. Moreover, the film also makes use of the conventional techniques of the Bollywood industry while at the same time keeping to the essential theme of the play. This article critically analyses how the film portrays power relations among the different characters, based on the hierarchical status quo in the society represented. This power hierarchy is based on several factors that determine the identity of the respective characters, and one of the most prominent among these is gender. The article explores how the film portrays and even criticizes the intricacies associated with the subjugation of women. It also analyses how this film portrays the binary of the "ideal Indian woman" and the "otherized" "bad woman" based on certain recurring stereotypical characteristics and by implementing the "male gaze" that Laura Mulvey talks about in her book *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Moreover, it also looks at how certain stereotypical characteristics are presented as masculine. Apart from these, the article also explores how the film portrays the misuse and corruption of power by those who are more privileged within the social hierarchy. These power relations as portrayed in this film adaptation are different from that what are seen in Shakespeare's *Othello* since the film portrays a very different spatiotemporality than that of the play.

Keywords: Cinema, adaptation, gender, women, patriarchy, power

Adaptation and Cultural Translation of Shakespeare in Bhardwaj's *Omkara*

Omkara (2006) is a Bollywood crime drama film adapted from William Shakespeare's *Othello*, written and directed by Vishal Bhardwaj. It starred Ajay Dhevgan, Saif Ali Khan, Kareena Kapoor and Vivek Oberoi in the lead roles, supported by Konkona Sen Sharma, Bipasha Basu and Naseeruddin Shah. The director Vishal Bhardwaj himself composed the music for the film, including the background score, with lyrics by Gulzar. The film is set in Meerut, a town in Western Uttar Pradesh. *Omkara* is the second film in Bhardwaj's trilogy of Shakespeare adaptations, which began with *Maqbool* (2003); an adaptation of *Macbeth*, and was completed with *Haider* (2014); an adaptation of *Hamlet*. *Omkara* was screened at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival, and also at the Cairo International Film Festival, where Bhardwaj was awarded for the Best Artistic Contribution in Cinema of a Director. The film also won several awards at other film festivals.

Susan Hayward, in her book *Cinema Studies*, describes literary adaptation to film. She says, "A literary adaptation creates a new story, it is not the same as the original, it takes on a new life, as indeed do the characters. Narrative and characters become independent of the original even though both are based – in terms of genesis – on the original." (4). Bhardwaj has been very careful in the representation of the Indian cultural background in the film. *Omkara* and his men, including Langda and Kesu, are henchmen, whereas their counterparts in Shakespeare are soldiers. This has been done by Bhardwaj in order to make an honest adaptation of the power relations among the characters in Shakespeare, and also to suite the difference of context between the play and the film as far as time and space are concerned.

Masculinity in *Omkara*

Omkara Shukla (*Othello* in Shakespeare) is a sort of political enforcer, the leader of a gang which commits political crimes for the local politician, Tiwari Bhaisaab (*The Duke of Venice* in Shakespeare). Ishwar 'Langda' Tyagi (*Iago* in Shakespeare) and Keshav 'Kesu Firangi' Upadhyay (*Cassio* in Shakespeare) are his closest lieutenants.

The movie starts with Langda Tyagi insinuating Rajan (*Rodrigo* in Shakespeare) to try and stop *Omkara* from abducting his bride, Dolly Mishra (*Desdemona* in Shakespeare). Rajan fails, and the wedding does not take place. Rajan is portrayed as physically weak and effeminate, and there are certain techniques that are used to present him in such a way, and to an extent, the stereotypes used for such a portrayal of this character internalizes such characteristics as indicating weakness or lack of masculinity. Rajan is thin, frail and small, unlike the other main "masculine, well built" characters. In *Omkara*, masculinity is stereotyped as men who have well-built bodies, as the roles of the main male characters, including the villains, are played by actors who are well-built; Ajay Devgn as the protagonist *Omkara*, Saif Ali Khan as Langda, and Vivek Oberoi as Kesav. Such a portrayal of the main male characters has become a common trend in Bollywood, even though this had begun much earlier in Hollywood, which shows that Western stereotypes of masculinity has had tremendous influence upon Indian cinema and other cultural productions. Male audiences find in the archetypal characters and family relationships of commercial Hindi films a reassuring sense of continuity, while being at the same time able to flirt with images of modernity and Westernisation (Valicha 1988: 48-60; Derne 2000).

The Symbolic Significance of the Antagonist's Disability

Langda is the villain who finds pleasure in seeing the suffering of others. Unlike Shakespeare's *Iago*, Langda is crippled, and ironically, this physical deformity as portrayed in the film implicitly symbolizes the deformity of his psyche. This is more evident when, in the middle of the film, he describes himself as "a human being, but perhaps not entirely human." Langda has always felt like an outcast due to the social discrimination that he has been subjected to on account of his physical

deformity, which is a significant reason why he likes to see others suffering. He is often presented as standing at a high place and observing the people below. This is seen at the beginning of the film when Langda stands on top of a hill with a gun, observing the people below. Later, towards the middle of the film, he is seen with Rajan on top of a bridge. Thus, by portraying Langda as observing others from a distance, he is implicitly presented as an outsider, because the society has forced him to be so. This aggrieved outcast observes human lives closely from a distance and carefully plots catastrophe, like a hawk that spots its prey from above and waits for the right moment to strike.

Patriarchy, Masculinity and Power in *Omkara*

Following the cue from Langda, Rajan rushes on his old motorcycle to stop the abduction of his bride (Dolly), but miserably fails. Through a song sequence, the film conveys to the reader that Omkara and Dolly had fallen in love with each other due to an accidental encounter and consequent turn of circumstances. The viewer is shown how Dolly falls in love with the “masculine man” as represented by Omkara, rather than the effeminate Rajan. Throughout the film, Rajan is presented as a figure of ridicule, while simultaneously promoting certain stereotypical and hegemonic constructs of masculinity. Dolly’s marriage with Rajan had already been fixed by her father, Advocate Raghunath Mishra (Brabantio in Shakespeare) who never thought of asking his daughter’s opinion before choosing a husband for her. Thus, Dolly is presented as becoming the victim of a patriarchal society in which the woman has no right to even choose her own partner. After Omkara abducts a consenting Dolly, Raghunath is furious and confronts Omkara by pointing a gun at his head and demanding the return of his daughter. However, Bhaisaab intervenes in favour of Omkara since he is more obliged towards him than Raghunath. Thus, we see how Bhardwaj has very cleverly chosen the Indian counterparts for Shakespeare’s characters to represent power relations and politics. Unlike the monarchical society represented in Shakespeare, we see a corrupt democracy as seen through the way that Bhaisaab wins the elections through false means. For Bhaisaab, a political enforcer and goon such as Omkara is more valuable than a man of the law as represented by Raghunath.

The film makes use of certain techniques in order to portray Omkara as heroic, brave and courageous. He is initially presented as climbing down a set of steps while the others are watching him, and the camera follows him from behind, showing his rigid back. Moreover, the camera is positioned in such a way that he is positioned at the centre in most of the scenes in the film, indicating his superiority and high position within the power structure.

In a scene in which Rajan comes to visit Omkara, the hierarchy and power relations among the different characters are indicative. Omkara is at the centre, relaxing on a hammock which is rocked by his nephew. The background is Omkara’s huge bungalow which displays prosperity. The tall walls surrounding the mansion indicate confinement, usually of the women in the family, who hardly go out of the house. On the wall are pasted cow dung cakes so that they would fall onto the ground after becoming dry. Besides, there are two hay stacks in front of the house. These indicate that the family is engaged in agriculture and animal breeding. The scene begins with a close-up shot of Omkara’s boot-covered feet as he is resting in a hammock that is being rocked by his nephew. Rajan is sitting on a mat on the ground, indicating his inferior position in the power structure. Kesav and Langda are seen at Omkara’s left and right; Kesav leaning on to a tree while Langda is seated on a stool. A little behind are two of Omkara’s men seated on the ground. Suddenly, Dolly comes till the gate of the house and calls Omkara, but she does not walk beyond the wall surrounding the house.

Tiwari Bhaisaab is introduced to the audience as a prisoner in a jail, sitting on a chair at the centre with a policeman and a politician seated on either side, while a barber is engaged in shaving Bhaisaab’s scalp. The fact that he is a prisoner in a jail indicates that he is a criminal. The policeman and the

politician sitting subserviently beside Bhaissab shows his influence and power, indicating that he is above the law. Even though he has been imprisoned, he lives like a king.

Raghunath grieves to Bhaisaab over his daughter. To bring an end to this issue, Dolly is asked to appear in front of her father and clarify that she had eloped with Omkara and was not abducted. She also explains the events of how she fell in love with Omkara, and states that she willingly eloped with him since she loves him. The father leaves feeling betrayed and ashamed. Just before his daughter is about to leave, he says to Omkara, "A woman who deceives her father will be no one's to claim." Here, the woman is objectivized as through she is some kind of property that is passed on from the custody of one man to the other: from the father to the husband.

After some crafty political arm twisting, Omkara eliminates a powerful electoral rival. Bhaisaab is elected for the parliament, and Omkara is promoted from *bahubali* to the candidate for the upcoming state elections. Omkara appoints Kesu over Langda as his successor since Kesu wields great influence over college students, even though Langda is more deserving. Omkara is under the impression that Langda would understand the situation. However, Langda is disappointed with Omkara's decision and becomes jealous of Kesu, his younger, less experienced.

After returning home, Langda breaks his reflection in a mirror with his bare hands and ordains himself as *bahubali* by wiping his forehead with blood from his injured hand; a symbol of his resolution to take revenge against the wrong done to him by shedding the blood of his enemies. In this scene, he is shown as looking at his reflection in the mirror in dim light, indicating the darkness that has come over upon his heart, and also that he is left in the dark to grieve for himself with no one to see his misery.

Langda hatches a plot to avenge both of his offenders. He first causes a violent brawl between Kesu and Rajan by taking advantage of Kesu's low threshold for alcohol. Such irresponsible behaviour by Kesu infuriates Omkara, who now starts having doubts over his decision.

On the one hand, playing the role of a concerned friend, Langda convinces Kesu to appeal to Dolly to mollify Omikara. On the other hand, he starts to disrepute Dolly in Omkara's eyes by implicating Kesu's visits to her as an illicit affair between the two. Omkara begins to doubt Dolly, and one day, he slaps her. Afterwards, Dolly is seen lamenting under a setting sun, which is, in fact, an instance of irony through visual imagery, where the setting sun prophesizes her setting relationship with her husband.

There are indications in the film that Omkara's doubt is motivated by his inferiority complex of not being as fair as Dolly. So, he may have been jealous of Dolly's fairness. Then, jealousy is his hamartia. We see this feeling being motivated in him in the beginning when everyone teases him for not being as fair as Dolly. His sister, Indu, compares Dolly and Omkara respectively to "milk in a vessel of coal" and "burfi in the mouth of a crow." This is suggested when he asks Dolly in the end, "Did I lack anything?" Or perhaps it was his inferiority complex of being a half-caste, since his father was a Brahmin and his mother was of a lower caste. However, in Shakespeare, we see only the issue of race. Bhardwaj has wisely selected the problem of caste as the Indian counterpart for race in Europe since caste is more suitable to the Indian context.

A *kamarbandh* (belly chain) carelessly dropped by Dolly and stolen by Langda's wife, Indu (Emilia in Shakespeare), is misused by Langda to the effect of misdirecting Omkara towards believing in Dolly's infidelity. On the night of their wedding, Omkara is convinced by Langda that Dolly and Kesu have been having an affair behind his back. In rage, he smothers Dolly to death using a pillow. Langda shoots Kesu with a silent approval from Omkara. Kesu is hit with a bullet on his arm. Hearing

gunshots and in shock, Indu enters the room where Omkara is sitting in remorse next to Dolly's corpse. Indu notices the *kamarbandh* and confesses to stealing it. They both understand the fatal misunderstanding with Langda as its root cause.

In retribution, Indu slashes Langda's throat, and Omkara commits suicide by shooting himself in the heart. The film comes to an end with Omkara lying dead on the floor and Dolly's dead body swinging above him.

According to Susan Hayward, as stated in her *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, "Essentially, there appear to be three types of literary adaptation: first, the more traditionally connoted notion of adaptation, the literary classic; second, adaptations of plays to screen; and, finally, the adaptation of contemporary texts not yet determined as classics and possibly bound to remain within the canon of popular fiction. Of these three, arguably, it is the second that remains most faithful to the original, although contextually, it may be updated into contemporary times, as with several Shakespeare adaptations" (12). This is very true regarding Bharadhwaj's *Omkara* adapted from Shakespeare's *Othello*. Even though it mostly remains faithful to the original play by Shakespeare, the characters and the situations have been changed in such a way that it would entirely suit the Indian cultural context without losing any of the essential themes in Shakespeare.

In the article *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema*, Cartmell and Whelehan state that adaptations depend on the way they are projected. "Film adaptations have often been branded in derogatory terms implying sacrilege, theft, impurity, dilution, and failure to preserve the integrity of the source" (4-5). However, Cartmell and Whelehan argue that adaptation from literature to film cannot preserve the actual representation of the text as it focuses more on the interest of the audience than does the original. They also point out that "texts were also often judged on the misunderstood assumption that the goal of the adaptation was simply one of replication, rather than other motivations such as interrogation, reinvention, or exploration" (3-4).

However, *Omkara*, while essentially preserving the significant themes in Shakespeare, such as the protagonist's hamartia of jealousy, and also other significant characteristic traits of the main characters, it refutes beliefs, observations and theories supporting the complete fidelity of screen adaptations of plays, because there is a significant theme that is very prominent in *Omkara*, much more than the Shakespearean play, and this is the theme of subjugation and ill treatment of women in a patriarchal society.

The film presents patriarchy as the social order. Men control systems of power and play with it, while women are never seen in such a position. Moreover, men see women as their property like any other material possession. *Omkara* provides a close view of the psychology of man. Omkara, Langda, Rajan and Raghunath represent different aspects of man's ego. Dolly, who is totally innocent, becomes the victim of this ego. Langda stimulates Omi's ego: his inferiority complex of being a half-caste and having a dark complexion; his jealousy towards Dolly; and his suspecting nature. Raghunath, Dolly's father, considers his daughter his property. He believes that he has every right to get his daughter married to the man whom he finds for her. Just before leaving after "losing his daughter" to Omi, he says, "She who dupes her father will be no one's to claim." This is a very patriarchal statement. Here, the father as well as the "one" who tries to claim "her" is men. This suggests the patriarchal notion that woman is for man to claim; first by her father, and later by her husband. While Raghunath says this to Omkara, we see Dolly through the glass of the window of Raghunath's car. This gives the idea that men discuss, plot, and make decisions, and women are kept behind a veil of obscurity. Woman is presented as never independent, but always under the control of man. Ironical is the fact that Omkara takes Raghunath's statement to his heart and repeats it when he begins to doubt Dolly, and later, after smothering her to death. Thus, this statement occurs thrice in the film; in the beginning, middle and

end. Moreover, Dolly's mother is not even shown in the film, and the audience sees nothing of her mother's perspective and emotions regarding the elopement of her daughter.

The Good Woman and Her 'Other' in *Omkara*

The mode of representation of women characters in cinema differs from the literary text. Laura Mulvey, in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, argues that women are always an image and object under men in cinema. She adds that the image of women "is isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualized. But as the narrative progresses, she falls in love with the main male protagonist and becomes his property, losing her outward, glamorous characteristics, her generalized sexuality, her show-girl connotations; her eroticism is subjected to the male star alone. By means of identification with him, through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too" (62). The character of Dolly in *Omkara* represents the women in society without power and under the subjugation of males. Dolly, played by Kareena Kapoor, is very fair. Dolly is presented as very beautiful and as highly coveted. In *Omkara*, Dolly is an "ideal wife" who is presented as always very loyal and subordinate towards her husband. In the very beginning of the film, Dolly is presented as having eloped with the male protagonist, and therefore, we do not see very glamorous and sexualized depictions of the beautiful heroine since she has already been possessed by the hero.

However, the character of Billo, played by Bipasha Basu, is very much sexualized in the movie, especially through two item numbers. Thus, Dolly and Billo represent two typical recurrent stereotypes in Bollywood cinema: While Dolly depicts the virtuous and ever loyal wife, Billo is the opposite, more sexualized woman of the public. Even though Billo is in a relationship with Kesu, theirs is not a committed relationship, and Kesu has affairs with multiple women.

Objectification and Subjugation of Women in a Patriarchal Society

The very name "Dolly" seems to be a deliberate selection. The way she is treated by her father as well as her husband is similar to how children consider their dolls with a feeling of much possessiveness. Moreover, as *Omkara* sings a song for her, he addresses her as *gudiya*, meaning doll. Bhardwaj seems to have deliberately used the word "doll". This reminds us of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, a play that questions patriarchy and calls for the liberation of women.

The women in *Omkara* are presented as engaged in domestic chores and confined to the family, and as hardly connected with the outer world, as symbolized through the tall walls surrounding all the sides of the family bungalow. The film has a male eye and has been made in such a way that it would suit the taste of a male audience, particularly evident from the two "item numbers" by Billo, where we see the woman presented as an object of the male gaze. In the film, woman appears as a seductress who makes men egoistic and leads them to clash among themselves. Dolly becomes the subject of two men's ego; that of *Omkara* and Rajan. Billo is an "item" dancer whose audience, we see, are only males, and they look at Billo with desire. She is asked to perform in front of the policemen in order to deviate their attention, and she is very successful in doing so. She even plays with their guns and caps, and the highest point of sarcasm is reached when a policeman salutes her. Thus, the film gives the idea that a woman can control men only through the method of seduction, and not through anything else.

Dolly is always presented as a submissive and meek character. The darkness of patriarchy can be seen in Dolly's reply to *Omkara* when he asks her whether she had given away the *kamarbandh* (a token of love and a family heirloom handed over by *Omkara* to Dolly) to someone else, "To whom would I hand it over to, Omi? I have given away everything for you." A woman's helplessness and reliability on males in a patriarchal society is evident through these lines.

The only woman character in *Omkara* who seems to have some identity and agency is Indu. She is bold enough to speak out her mind at least on a few occasions. She consoles Dolly when Omkara begins to treat her indifferently and rudely as a result of the instigations of Langda. Mike Heidenberg mentions, "While most of the film's characters are clear analogues of the original characters, Bhardwaj radically reimagines the Emilia character to be a much more empowered and integral player in the film's action" (88). As Omkara begins to treat Dolly rudely, Indu says to him, "We give away everything to be with you, and then adapt to your surroundings. And later, if you too kick us out, what would we do?" Such statements call for the necessity of self reliability of women. Otherwise, they may become submissive under the control of domineering men who may easily exploit them. In *Omakara*, Indu has been deliberately provided with some agency as a woman, which is not the case with Shakespeare's Emilia. This is particularly prominent towards the end when Langda is killed by Indu who slashes his throat, while in Shakespeare, there is no such initiative from the part of any woman character. Thus, *Omkara*, unlike Shakespeare's *Othello*, has taken some deliberate effort towards emphasizing the subjugation and ill treatment of women under a patriarchal system.

Thus, *Omakara* very successfully makes use of cinematic and narrative techniques to portray power relations among the different characters. The film is quite a very suitable adaptation of Shakespeare's play in the way how its characters and the context have been designed to suit a particular kind of Indian context. Moreover, the way it depicts issues like patriarchy and the subjugation of women is characteristically very Indian in nature. This theme is very prominently, and even deliberately, emphasized in *Omakara*.

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