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TITLE: REVENGE TRIGGERED: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *OTHELLO* AND *OMKARA*

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Abstract:

Movie adaptation of renowned classics is a tough task. It becomes tougher when a play published in 17th century England has to be reworked for 21st century India. Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, does just that. This paper attempts to show how the director has reconstructed the great tragedy, keeping the basic themes same but altering the more finer points such as the caste and class issue or discrimination on the basis of complexion and ethnic background. It also brings out the way in which the screen version has rendered a powerful female agency in Indu and how she tries to get justice for her companion Dolly in a choking and overpowering male dominated environment.

Keywords: Othello, Omkara, Complexion, Ocular Proof, Race, Caste.

Introduction

Can a literary piece be actually adapted into a movie? Creating a movie that brings out the truest sense, meaning and feeling of a literary work is almost impossible to accomplish. But then there are movies like *The Godfather* (1972) or *The Adventures of Tintin* (2011) that has been adapted on screen and, if not wholly, almost perfectly revives the characters created by Mario Puzo or Georges Prosper Remi aka Hergé respectively. Watching a movie based on a book is like reliving the process of reading, only in a comparatively shorter duration. And as with reliving any experience, readers too want to feel what they have felt earlier while reading the work. The same goes for Vishal Bhardwaj's 2006 movie *Omkara* as well, which is loosely based on William Shakespeare's *Othello*, except that the plot is set in postcolonial India with a rural Uttar Pradesh village as background, and the character Othello transmuted to Omkara, a 'bahubali' or strongman of a local political leader.

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Black versus White: Same Theme, Changing Narrative

Shakespeare's *Othello* is fundamentally a story of hatred and revenge that the protagonist is made to go through. Although a public figure, the play focuses primarily on Othello's private life and how he is manipulated by Iago into believing the former's wife Desdemona is unfaithful, which ultimately makes him kill her. This very story provides the master-plot for *Omkara*, with the settings vastly changed – Othello becomes Omkara 'Omi' Shukla, a local hitman, surrounded by his two lieutenants Ishwar 'Langda' Tyagi (Iago) and Keshav 'Kesu Firangi' Upadhyay (Cassio). There is also Dolly Sharma (Desdemona) along with her companion Indu Tyagi (Emilia).

Although dissimilar in plot, both the play and the movie engage with the complexion of the characters, contrasting the black with the white. Shakespeare's Othello is black, and hence was considered as an outcaste in the Venetian locality. In the whole play he is frequently referred to, not with his real name, but as the "Moor" and is often reminded that he is a "foreigner". Every time his skin colour comes to the forefront, it is contrasted with the snowy white complexion of his wife. The play successfully injects the idea in readers'

minds that being black is associated with roughness, violence, and stolidity, while being white is equivalent to purity, innocence and divine. This polarity is seen as Iago informs instinctively to Brabantio about his daughter's peril in the following manner: "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tugging your white ewe" (I.i.88-89), and later continues to compare Othello and his folks derogatorily to animals: "you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse; / you'll have your nephews neigh to you" (I.i.110-112).

Similar things occur in the Bhardwaj movie as well but with a slight difference. Here Omkara, although dark skinned, is not treated as an outsider, mainly because he belongs to the rural interiors of Uttar Pradesh, where majority of the people are dark. In contrast, his fiancé and later wife Dolly appears as a recluse with her snow white complexion. As a matter of fact, the film underlines Dolly's fairness very strongly as Indu teases the couple with idioms like "*koyelein ke lotey mein doodh*" (Milk in cup made of coal) or "*kabbey ke choch me barfi*" (Sweetmeat in crow's beak) or "*amabash ki godi mein chandan*" (Sandalwood in a new moon night's lap), but then lovingly reveals – "*karey kanhaiya ke hotho mein bansuri*" (Flute in Krishna's lips) (*Othello*, 36:57-37:28). She becomes an

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object of people's gaze; even the old woman in the village touches Dolly as if to 'feel' her whiteness. Lalita Pandit Hogan places this black-white dyad in a mythical context as she compares Ajay Devgn to the dark blue-black Lord Krishna and Kareena Kapoor to the white Radha (54), which also reminds us of the popular song: "*Yashomati maiya se bole nandlala / Radha kyun gori, main kyun kala?*" (Little Krishna asks mother Yashomati / Why is Radha white, why am I black?). According to her, "the white and black dichotomy is put in a very different context in *Omkaara*, and this is one of the film's significant contributions to understanding the core emotion in Shakespeare's play, the love of Othello and Desdemona, which Shakespeare introduces at the outset through the distortive gaze and perception, or may be just the hate-language of Iago." (Hogan 54).

Race versus Caste: Are Both Othello and Omkara Outsiders?

Now what is Othello? He is the night, An immense fatal figure. Night is amorous of day. Darkness loves the dawn. The African adores the white woman. Othello has for his light and for his frenzy,

Desdemona. And then, how easy to him is jealousy! He is great, he is dignified, he is majestic, he soars above all heads; he has as an escort bravery, battle, the braying of trumpets, the banners of war, renown, glory; he is radiant with twenty victories, he is studded with stars, this Othello: but he is black. And thus how soon, when jealous, the hero becomes the monster, the black becomes the negro! (Hugo 126).

Both Othello and Omkara, although have many dissimilarities, have one thing in common – they are the victims of treachery of one of their closest aides. Both of them were guilty of being too naïve and foolish, so much so that they did not trust their own wives and went on to follow their deputies blindly, only to lose their self-worth that eventually ends in murder.

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But then there are stark differences in their character portrayals as well. Othello is the “noble moor”, “valiant” – a war general viewed widely as one of the most able and powerful in the war front. A proud, strong and experienced soldier, he was dispatched to Cypress, a Venetian stronghold, by the Venetian senate when the island falls under attack by a Turkish fleet. He was regarded by one and all as the final word in terms of wars and battles. In spite of that he was as an outsider, only because he was a Moor – a black individual from one of the African countries. That he is not one of their own, however respectable, is unmasked when Iago mocks his lineage as: “These Moors are changeable in their wills” (I.iii.349), and later on compares himself with Othello, “an erring Barbarian and a supersubtle venation” (I.iii.358-359); thus, even after being a well-known man for his prowess, his identity as a “barbarian” finds the top spot.

Omkara Shukla, in contrast, is neither a noble general nor is an outsider. He is a ganglord. Unlike Othello, Omkara is a local villager, whose life revolves around the confines of its locality. He protects the local politician Bhaisaab; the latter contests in the Lok Sabha elections and, in turn, offers “young social worker” (*Othello*, 29:40-29:44) Omkara a seat in the

Vidhan Sabha too. What is identical between the two protagonists is that both are strongmen working for an even more powerful individual. The lyrics “*Dham dham dharma dharaiya re / Sabse bade ladaiyo re Omkara*” (*Omkara*, 26:10-26:17) defines his superior physical strength.

Othello’s skin colour makes him an outsider but Omkara is also shown to be somewhat the same because of his ‘mixed caste’ – a theme that reigns supreme in any Indian society. Shakespeare’s race issue is transmuted by Bhardwaj into a caste issue. Omi’s father was a Brahmin whereas his mother was a low caste prostitute, a fact that Dolly’s father and advocate Raghunath Mishra (Brabantio) does not forget to allude to by calling Omkara a “*adha Brahman*” or half-Brahmin. There are several close-up shots of bare bodied Ajay Devgn wearing the sacred thread, traditionally worn by Brahmins; nevertheless, he is expected not to marry a girl belonging to a ‘pure’ Brahmin family.

There is yet another aspect of Omkara’s caste and why he is treated as a marginalized character. According to ancient spiritual texts, Indian society was divided into four strata – Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. It was not in the culture of Brahmins to take

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upon arms because they were considered to be the purest caste and thus closest to God. But Omi is a goon who always carries a gun. The movie obliquely criticizes the Indian caste system where lower castes are not allowed to marry the upper ones, yet there is a role reversal as the powerful characters, like Bhaisaab, Ishwar, Keshav and Raghunath, are all Brahmins who forget their caste alongside its associated non-violence and truth to “take up arms and resort to violence to settle disputes” (Hogan 54) – as a result, their inflated caste identities get somewhat humbled.

Jealousy Unleashed: Iago to Ishwar

The epitome of villainy is Iago. Othello’s trusted general, he was outmatched by Michael Cassio who passed him over for promotion for a place that was coveted by him. He gets hurt because he assumes he is a much better figure in terms of military experience and condemns Othello for choosing Cassio over him:

And I, of whom
his eyes had seen
the proof
At Rhodes, at
Cyprus, and on
other grounds,

Christian and
heathen, must be
be-lee’d and calm’d
By debtor and
creditor – (I.i.28-31)

And from that very moment on Iago starts hating Othello, a hate so strong that ultimately causes the downfall of such a powerful and commanding personality as Othello. Iago has another major reason for having Othello – he suspects that the latter might have had physical relationship with his wife Emilia, but is not sure: “And it is thought abroad that ‘twixt my sheets / ‘Has done my office” (I.iii.390-391).

G. Wilson Knight calls Iago an utterly devilish character and compares him with Mephistopheles since both have analogous qualities of ‘mockery’ and ‘easy cynicism’ (174). Iago knows about his own fiendish nature and he himself reveals it:

...Divinity of hell!
When devils will
their blackest sins
put on,
They do suggest at
first with heavenly
shows,
As I do now;
(II.iii.339-342)

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Iago shakes the very foundation of trust in the play. He creates a poisonous misunderstanding between Cassio and Othello that resulted in the former being chided by the general; and later on cunningly implanted the sinister idea in Othello's mind that Desdemona might be unfaithful. He destroys the Moor's career, marriage and finally his life, but in the process Iago has perhaps destroyed his own conscience too. Without a hint of guilt, he continues to instigate Othello to kill his wife, and enjoys a sense of pride for he has succeeded in ruining everybody, irrespective of that person's guilt or innocence:

Work on,
My medicine,
work. Thus
credulous fools are
caught;
And many worthy
and chaste dames
even thus,
All guiltless, meet
reproach. (IV.i.44-
47)

Bhardwaj's Ishwar Tyagi is no different. He is nicknamed 'Langda' due to a limp in his leg, resembling Othello's labeling as a 'Moor', and every time the former is being called by his nickname, it sounds like a grave

insult to the viewer. In the same way as the play, Kesu Firangi (Cassio) too is appointed as the new leader after Omkara, much to Ishwar's disappointment which fuels his revenge. In a strikingly powerful scene, Ishwar is seen breaking a mirror with his bare hand and smear the blood on his forehead, just like Omi smeared vermilion on Kesu's after making him the general – thus emphasizing that Ishwar's anger is justified. He shrewdly manages to gain Omkara's trust by acting innocently but at the same time brainwashed him into believing that Dolly and Kesu are having an illicit relationship. Neither Othello nor Dolly or Keshav ever get any indication that they have been double-crossed this whole time.

A major difference in the film adaptation is that justice seems to have partially been delivered through the death of Langda. Shakespeare's Iago kills his wife Emilia at the end of the play as she disentangles the whole plot and reveals that her husband was the true culprit whose "odious, damned lie" (V.ii.183) has doomed the lives of all other characters in the play. But in *Omkara* an inversion occurs – Indu becomes the cause of her husband's death. This depiction of female empowerment is what makes the cinema a unique one. Florence Cabaret calls

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these merciless bloodshed episodes, especially those done by Indu or Kesu, as “contamination of violence in a corrupt world” (113) where the not-so-heroic actors, knowing that they will never get justice through the law of the land, become helpless and subsequently take the law in their own hands.

Harold Bloom had rightly called Iago both the “genius” and “bad angel” of Othello (xi). His own suffering, his sense of injured merit, had made him a traitor. “The wound to Iago”, Bloom says, “is onto-theological. He had worshipped Othello as war-god. Betrayed, Iago activates his pyromaniac drive to carry war into the camp of peace. A true believer bereft of his fiery faith, Iago uncovers in himself a genius for destroying his captain-general” (xi). All these traits hold true for Ishwar as well.

Innocence and Love Redefined: Desdemona and Dolly

Shakespeare’s Desdemona is the embodiment of supreme Venetian beauty. Although courted by many nobles in the country, she is “so opposed to marriage that she shunn’d / The wealthy curled darlings” (I.ii.67-68); but to his father’s astonishment secretly married a black moor and several years her senior – Othello. From that moment on, Desdemona continues to bear the burden of Brabantio’s strong resentment and

dislike who cautions all the fathers in general and address them thus: “Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters’ minds / By what you see them act” (I.i.171-172). Disgusted and alarmed by his daughter’s behavior, he even curses Othello that will later prove to be mortally effective: “She has deceiv’d her father, and may thee.” (I.iii.293).

Desdemona loved Othello with all her heart but soon her ill-fate and misunderstandings get the upper hand. Iago exploits Othello’s unsuspecting nature into believing that she is an adulteress. As she notices the change in her husband’s behaviour, she begins to inquire about the reason, but Othello’s mind was so festered by Iago’s exploits that he denies to see reason and ultimately cause her death by his own hands.

The film also presents a similar fate for Dolly Mishra, only that here she is not yet married. The movie starts with her marriage already settled with Rajan Tiwari, when suddenly Omkara and his gang stops the bridegroom’s party midway and kidnaps the bride, only to be revealed later on that she herself had made the arrangements of this whole process. Hogan brings out the mythic allusion of this scenario by comparing it with epic Mahabharata where Arjuna abducts Krishna’s sister Subhadra (51),

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obviously with the latter's willingness and consent.

Dolly also suffers the same fate as Desdemona, who could never convince her husband about her innocence and fidelity. When Omi saw Dolly and Keshav singing Stevie Wonder's "I Just Called to Say I Love You", erroneously failing to understand that it was intended for him only. Under these circumstances, doubt naturally entered his mind. However, even after such incident, there was some love left in Omkara; and in a long shot of almost two minutes, while the track "*O Saathi Re*" plays in the background, the couple are shown teasing and running after each other, thus immersing in their love life. This engaging scene faces an abrupt contrast when Omi suddenly bewilders, "*Kahin tere iss roop mein koi tantar mantar to nehi chupa hai*" (Wonder whether there is any magic in your beauty), almost echoing Brabantio's accusation towards Othello: "That thou hast practis'd on her with foul charms, / Abus'd her delicate youth with drugs or minerals / That weakens motion." (I.ii.73-75). Othello was charged with using foul magic to capture Desdemona's attention – an aptitude that Omi doubts Dolly was using to capture his.

Critics are divided as to whether it was Othello's inability to take decision

or Desdemona's own doing that caused her downfall. John Quincy Adams presses on the second theory and reasons that Desdemona's passion for Othello was unnatural and "her elopement to him, and secret marriage with him, indicate a personal character not only very deficient in delicacy, but totally regardless of filial duty, of female modesty, and of ingenuous shame" (Bloom 124). Although it might have held true for the play, or during Adams' 19th century society, it certainly doesn't in a postmodern 2006 world.

Handkerchief versus Waistband: Touch of Eroticism

Shakespeare's handkerchief is one of the self significant props in the history of English plays. Gifted by Othello as a love token which he claims to have magical powers, he reminding her of its history that an Egyptian gifted it to his mother:

...while she kept it
'Twould make her
amiable, and
subdue my father
Entirely to her
love; but it she
lost it,
Or made a gift of
it, my father's eye

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Should hold her
loathely, and his
spirits should hunt
After new fancies.
(III.iii.58-63)

Othello sees this mere piece of cloth as love token which will ultimately entrap Desdemona in falsity. He believes in superstitious power, in a mere inanimate object, and thus creates his own pitfall.

Several critics have underlined the symbolism lying deep inside the handkerchief's design – it is a square piece of white linen spotted with strawberry-red fruits. Lawrence J. Ross opines that strawberries are emblematic of virgin blood and was considered by Elizabethans as the purest of fruits. This argument extends to Desdemona's wedding bed sheets, as it was an age-old custom for people to display one's wedding bedsheet as a "visual proof of their consummated marriage" (Boose 363). Tragedy occurs after this petty cloth gets misplaced thereby calling the whole structure of marriage into question. Irony cuts deep when Othello starts believing more on the handkerchief than on his wife's pledge of love. Eventually, in the play's final scenes, he permanently silences Desdemona due to her inability to produce it and also for not being able to prove her fidelity – both of which he saw and experienced

just moments ago. Very soon, as the truth behind the handkerchief's mysterious disappearance is revealed, the "Moor" understands his folly and then seeks to be punished: "Are there no stones in heaven / But what serves for the thunder?" (V.ii.238-239).

The concept of women's sexual purity has been eternally relevant, be it during Elizabeth I's reign or Elizabeth II's. Bhardwaj's cinematic prop transforms itself into a waistband in place of handkerchief and brings out the same concern. There is a tinge of eroticism in the accessory, which when worn by the three women – Dolly, Billo and Indu – on their exposed bellies, becomes the object of audience's gaze. Here the band has even more impact, since every time it was put on the purpose was to seduce their male counterparts. Dolly and Indu sports it while making love with their husbands, whereas the dancing Billo, accompanied by the item song "Namak", flashes it to some uniformed policemen. The very handkerchief, that signifies purity and must be concealed from others, is being mocked by transforming it into a device for winning attraction and lust.

The waistband has also been used symbolically in the movie like a weapon for Ishwar. There are several close-up shots of it, and he is displayed

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brandishing it like a sword. In the song sequence “*O Saathi Re*”, Konkona Sen Sharma is seen holding the ornament with a look of despair and a little jealousy on her face – perhaps she identifies it as the real reason behind Omi and Dolly’s conjugal success. Ironically, as the song ends, Indu with the band on her waist and Ishwar have passionate sex; but when the latter scrutinizes the ornament closely, he laughs devilishly, perhaps chalking out his plan to destroy Omkara. He wears it on his head like a *sehra* (a floral veil traditionally worn by Hindu grooms), which contrasts scathingly with the scene where Omi is spotted wearing the real *sehra* during his marriage. Florence Cabaret points out yet another aspect of this waistband – for her it is like “legendary belts of chastity offered by knights and military leaders to their wives when they went to war” (114). Thus, the same prop that is utilized to empower women – by letting them expressing their sexuality – is also applied for withholding their freedom too.

Naina Thag Lenge: The Dilemma of Ocular Proof

For Othello, Desdemona is a possession that should not have been invaded by anyone else. But when he suspects that she and Cassio are sharing intimacies, the Moor makes unbending resolution that she should be killed: “...she must die, else she’ll betray more

men” (V.ii.6). Othello was hoodwinked by Iago into believing that his wife has betrayed him. Doubt ruins Othello. The more cunning Iago drops his insinuations, the more the valiant warrior breaks, so much so that he finds himself asking, “Why did I marry?” (III.iii.242). But even then he threatens and asks one last time for ocular proof so as to visually verify the allegation against his wife:

Villain, be sure
thou prove my
love a whore –
Be sure of it; give
me the ocular
proof;
Or, by the worth
of man’s eternal
soul,
Thou hadst been
better have been
born a dog
Than answer my
wak’d wrath!
(III.iii.363-367)

Cornered, the desperate Iago gets hold of the handkerchief, tricks Cassio into possessing it, and then makes Othello see it in Cassio’s hands. Ironically, what the noble Moor ‘sees’, albeit physically ocular and true, what he concocted up was actually false – it was just a lurid mental picture of his. Hence, Othello

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was convinced by what his unconscious wanted him to believe; and this absoluteness of 'blind love' turning into 'blind hatred' caused Desdemona's death.

Bhardwaj makes his Omkara pursue after "ocular proof" as well. The protagonist becomes so impatient to learn about her wife's fidelity that he beats up Langda at the railway tracks to know the latter's opinion about Dolly – an opinion that will prove fatal to all three of the characters in question. The movie uses its song sequences to strengthen itself. The beautiful melody of "*Naina Thag Lenge*" matches with the ever-meaningful lyrics of Gulzar, the soulful voice of Rahat Fateh Ali Khan and indeed, the graceful eyes of Kareena Kapoor. The song begins while Dolly deserts her father. The theme of betrayal, around which the plot revolves, matches suitably with the lyrics of the song:

*Nainon ki mat
maaniyo re (Do
not believe those
eyes)*

*Nainon ki mat
suniyo (Do not
listen to those
eyes)*

*...Naina thag
lenge... (Those
eyes will fool you)*

It serves as a precaution to both the characters – who ironically, cannot listen to it, and the audience – who will understand the relevance later on, that eyes should not be trusted; and as if to give ocular proof for this premise, several exclusive shots of Kareena Kapoor are presented, focusing primarily on her eyes. The song signifies varied meanings in different situations. During Omi and Dolly's romance it emphasizes "*Naina raat ko chalte chalte / Swaarg mein le jaawe*" (Those eyes at night / Will take you to heaven), but when insecurity infiltrates Omkara those very eyes would snatch away his sleep: "*Jagte jaadu phukenge re / Neendein banjar kar denge*" (Those eyes will do magic while you're awake / And then even sleep will desert you). The final part of the song reminds the warning once again: "*Nainon ki zubaan pe bharosa nahi aata / Likhat padat na raseed na khata*" (Don't trust those eyes' promise for anything / Because there is no agreement or receipt).

The movie's final scenes bring out the long delayed anagnorisis of Omi – the ocular evidence that earlier formed doubts and ultimately a murder, now becomes the evidence that will fill him with guilt. As Indu, almost whisperingly, says that it was she who stole the waistband, the horrified Omkara realizes his mistake. Hogan brings out yet

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another aspect of this ocular proof. She suggests everybody “to doubt all that one sees in the material world because it is the world of maya, and is, thus, rife with agnoia. The only anagnorisis, recognition, one can attain is the recognition of one’s error.” (61).

Conclusion

Othello as a text displays a society where race and colour gets the center stage and a man’s true ability, although gets recognition, does not secure the topmost place. Othello is cast as an outsider in Venice, a place dominated by ‘white’ people, due to his ‘black’ African ethnicity. Bhardwaj’s Indianized version *Omkaara* also brings out the black-white dichotomy in terms of complexion but in an entirely different way – the fair Dolly is almost an outsider amongst the brown-skinned villagers, but unlike Othello, is seen with an astonishing gaze and surprise. The chief prop also transforms from a handkerchief into a waistband which goes perfectly with the Indian background. As for the characters, their sketching are primarily done the same way, the only difference being that Indu kills Ishwar while herself lives to tell the tale. All these display Bhardwaj’s superb talent in adapting the great tragedy on screen, served as a spicy Indian dish.

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