

Omkara: Post-Colonial Recreation of Shakespeare's Othello

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Abstract

Adaptability of William Shakespeare and his works across various cultures reveals the interplay of world literature with local traditions. Vishal Bhardwaj created an “Indian adaptation” of Shakespeare’s Othello on screen as “Omkara”, where the background of Venetian court has been relocated to rural Uttar Pradesh. Bhardwaj recontextualized the canonical work of Shakespeare in a no-western setting. This paper views through the postcolonial lens on how the Classic Western tragedy has been transformed to the violent, caste-ridden hinterlands set in North India. Omkara breaks down the Eurocentric framework of Shakespeare while sustaining the central themes of betrayal, jealousy of the great tragedy through localized experience. Omkara deconstructs the English literary traditions set by the colonial legacy while validating non-western narratives in global story telling. To reflect India’s own hierarchies of marginalization, Bhardwaj has replaced the racial tension of Othello with Omkara’s caste-based exclusion, representing postcolonial aesthetics. The shift from race to caste plays an important role to display discrimination and belonging in India. Bhardwaj has used an unsanitized Indian regional dialect instead of the great poetic verses of Shakespeare on the screen which resulted in distancing Omkara from the sophistication and sanctity often attributed to Shakespearean works. Omkara rejects any elitist attributes and proves that Shakespearean works are not meant to be merely transplanted but rather recreated. This paper examines how Bhardwaj’s Omkara is a decolonization of the great tragedy, further proving that Shakespeare’s themes require fundamental changes to resonate in the minds of the reader or viewer depending on their cultural background.

Keywords: Shakespearean Adaptation, Decolonizing literature, Cultural hybridity, Bollywood Adaptation.

Introduction

Postcolonial theory examines the deep and enduring effects of European colonialism from the 18th to the 20th century. The theory emphasizes the impact of colonial rule on the political, social, economic, and cultural impacts, arguing that we can only comprehend our contemporary world through the lens of its imperial past (Loomba, 2015; Said, 1978). Indian education system was introduced to Shakespeare through Macaulay's infamous Minute on Indian Education (1835) by the British. Their goal was to create "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay, 1835). To instil respect for British culture and values, Shakespeare has been presented as pinnacle of English Literature and forced on the Indian elite. As a result, during colonial administration being well-versed in Shakespeare represented a class.

During early colonial period, Shakespearean works were read and performed only by the elite class Indians. It was during late 19th century, Indian writers and playwrights started to localize Shakespeare. Indians did not just merely consume Shakespeare, they adapted, and transformed his work, and turned it to serve local interests. In contemporary India, Shakespeare is celebrated and performed in all across India disconnecting its elitist root and becoming a part of India's own multifaceted cultural tapestry. Various directors and writers began to critique colonialism and explore postcolonial identities by consciously using Shakespeare. Vishal Bhardwaj's trilogy *Maqbool*, *Omkara* and *Haider* do not just "adapt" Shakespearean tragedies; he uses the Shakespearean structure to look at modern Indian issues of power, violence, and identity. The most powerful form of adaptation is radical re-contextualization, and Bhardwaj's *Omkara* is one of the greatest examples of that. Instead of merely bringing Shakespeare's stories to India, filmmakers like Bhardwaj remodel the plays to new narratives.

Literature Review

"Filming Shakespeare in India: Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara*", a seminal essay by Poonam Trivedi, argues that the shift from a racial to a caste-based identity for the protagonist is the film's masterstroke. It makes the power struggle immediately relevant to a contemporary Indian audience in the Post-Colonial India to portray corrupt feudal democracies. Studies argue that Othello's concerns about racial otherness are productively translated in *Omkara* into India's caste, color, and regional hierarchies: the protagonist's outsider status in Shakespeare becomes a question of caste, local legitimacy, and biographical origins in Bhardwaj's film. This shift is central to postcolonial readings that examine how local social orders replace or refract early modern racial discourse. Shakespeare has been a prominent figure in the history of English Literature and is still widely read, discussed, and appreciated (Dobson & Wells, 2001). Harold Bloom in his *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* said, Shakespearean ideas of human nature, character, individuality, selfhood, etc. are all existing facts prevalent to the present world. Shakespeare has been recognized by the people of every field whether literature, psychology, politics, or sociology. The characters of Shakespeare have been influenced so much that they are still the best subject for case studies as well.

The post-colonial perspective also looks at gender roles differently. Sara Soncini in her "Adapting Shakespeare in India," discusses how Desdemona portrayed as Dolly Mishra is portrayed within a particular Indian context where honor of women is controlled by patriarchal authority. Her defiance is not just of her father but of stringent social codes, making her fate a critique of patriarchal authority in modern India. Similarly, the character of Indu (Emilia), brilliantly portrayed by Konkona Sen Sharma showcased a powerful critique-laden dialogue which represents a distinct resonance of feminist protest within a South Asian setting.

However, a significant research gap persists as *Omkara* is only talked about due to its resemblance to the original text rather than how brilliantly it has been localized to reach every class of Indians. The movie not only shifts the background from race to caste, it carries far deeper implications. It is due to that fact that we do not understand the need to look at adaptations as deliberate ideological and ethical project rather than it's faithfulness to the original text. This paper will examine how Bhardwaj's *Omkara* Indianize Shakespeare to move him beyond elite colonial reading to reach audience across class boundaries.

Deconstructing Fidelity – Towards an Ideological Analysis of Adaptation

Many literary critics have been interested in the topic of colonialism in Shakespeare's work for a while. His works do not belong to post-colonial period as all were written in the early 17th century, yet they can be read through the lens of post-colonialism. This paper argues that Bhardwaj's *Omkara* does more than staying true to *Othello*; it performs a conscious remapping of the ideology of the Shakespearean work. It is often assumed that adaptations should be judged on the parameter set by the Shakespearean texts which gives the source text the ultimate authority. As a result, the adaptations like Bhardwaj's films are treated as secondary works. The very hierarchy adaptations like *Omkara* are trying to challenge.

Theorists like Linda Hutcheon and Julie Sanders argue that adaptations should be read as independent creation with their own creative, political, and cultural logic. The question is not whether *Omkara* is "faithful" to Shakespeare or not, as Bhardwaj is not just retelling the great *Othello* here. He changes the themes of race, jealousy, and betrayal of *Othello* into Indian context of caste, local politics and patriarchal violence to look at specific socio-political issues in India. In other words, the worth of *Omkara* is not about how close it is to *Othello* but how it reimagines, translates, and transforms Shakespeare's work to speak to new audiences and cultural conditions.

The film exists in the "third space" between Shakespeare's text and contemporary India. Homi K. Bhabha who coined the term argues that a new creation does not stem from a fixed original source but in the unstable, hybrid "third space" of enunciation between the source and its new context. This is where culture is translated and negotiation happens. *Omkara* lives in this "third space" between *Othello* and contemporary India. Its value is not in how well it has replicated the source but in the new meanings that emerged from this collision. In looking at adaptations, the important question isn't what has changed, but how these changes work in the new text and the ideology behind it. Transformations like handkerchief of Desdemona with Dolly's kamarbandh can make adaptation seem like cultural replacements.

"That handkerchief did an Egyptian to my mother give; she was a charmer... To lose't or give't away were such perdition / As nothing else could match."

In this scene, the handkerchief carries a deep, mystical, and symbolizing marital fidelity and a token of love with supernatural undertones. It also acts as a racialized item, connected to *Othello*'s exotic background.

"Yeh kamarbandh mere maa ne diya tha... meri shaadi ke liye."

Here the kamarbandh is not mystical but deeply intimate — it connects Dolly to her mother, to tradition, and to the sacredness of her marriage. Unlike a handkerchief, it is worn close to the body, denoting sexuality, intimacy, and bodily belonging in an Indian culture. The tradition of wearing Kamarbandh in Indian culture goes way back to Indus Valley civilization whereas handkerchief becomes a personal item of the mass during British colonial period. So, Bhardwaj did not replace this item not just to "Indianize" but to add a new layer of meaning in relation to gendered and cultural significance. Unlike the handkerchief, the "kamarbandh" intensifies the feeling of jealousy as it is a bodily belonging. Misplacement of the object represents not just betrayal, but it is shown to reflect the loyalty in a marriage which is expected in a patriarchal society.

This reinforces the arguments put up by scholar likes Ania Loomba who argues that post-colonial adaptations are not mere replication, rather re-interpretations and re-creations. The film dismantles the idea of Shakespeare as a universal, unchanging standard by showing that how his themes need not to be

restricted to fit a new setting. A post-colonial reading, informed by Bhabha, Loomba, and others demand we see Omkara as an adaptive argument—one that creates a new, hybrid work to critique both its source and its own context.

From Racial Moor to Regional Baahubali

Colonialism operates through the discursive construction of colonized peoples as the "Other," representing them as culturally and racially inferior to legitimize imperial rule (Said, 1978). These 'Others' lack in all aspects of life whether social, political, cultural, religious, and mostly the identity. Othello is a North- African Moor, who contributes to the general picture of Shakespeare of a racial other. Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) examines how Western ideas create a picture of the East as mysterious, inferior "Other." In Othello, the Moor is a racial outsider in Venice, respected for his military skill but looked down on due to the skin colour. The greatest success of Vishal Bhardwaj's Omkara lies not in its faithful reproduction of Shakespearean plot, but re-mapping of the central conflict of the story in such a way that shows how early European society is anxious about race and religion and realities of post-colonial North India.

The film brilliantly finds a functional analog for this "otherness" not in race, but in caste. Bhardwaj meticulously put up a great cast who can bring the physical authenticity to create one of the remarkable worlds of Omkara. Omkara (Othello) played by Ajay Devgan is a half-Dalit warlord in Uttar Pradesh—respected for his power but never fully accepted. Saif Ali Khan who portrayed Langda Tyagi (Iago) exploits caste resentment. Saif in one of his interviews confessed how he wanted to play the titular role but Bhardwaj stated that "he simply looked too urban". The decision ultimately reflects how post-colonial India enforces caste-based marginalization, showing continuity with colonial systems.

In Othello, his identity as a Moor has been exploited by Iago. He is constantly perceived as "lascivious Moor" and portrayed as an outsider to Venetian society due to his skin colour. Brabantio is horrified as his daughter Desdemona would choose someone like Othello who is "to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou". Othello has taken in this deep racism which makes him vulnerable to Iago's manipulation. He is slowly convinced that he is unworthy of loved by someone like Desdemona. Othello who seeks to belong in a prejudiced society gets destroyed by a bigoted world.

Omkara's otherness is due to society rather than race. He is ostracized because of his birth- illegitimate son of a Brahmin priest and a low-caste woman. To signify his impurity, he has been repeatedly referred to as 'ganda' which evokes untouchability connected with Dalit status. His power comes from being a baahubali (muscleman) for a local politician in a dangerous area of Uttar Pradesh not from official authority like Othello. Othello presides in a recognisable state apparatus whereas Omkara lives in a "political society", a society where formal law has been put up by some unwritten codes of kinship through brute force (Chatterjee, 2004). Omkara's power is resented throughout the film as it violates the deeply rooted caste hierarchy. Langda doesn't need to use racial slurs; his mere use of the word "ganda" and his high-caste sneer carry the same corrosive Othering power. Langda's schemes are a symbol of insecurity of a high caste threatened by a superior of low-caste born. The film's most important adaptation choice is this transposition, grounding the tragedy in the unique social hierarchies of India. The setting of Omkara itself acts as an active agent in the ideological re-mapping of Othello.

The Ethics of Transposition: Caste, Culture, and the Risk of Analogy

Bhardwaj audaciously performed a creative act- transposing the racial otherness in Othello to caste

based discrimination faced by a North Indian Baahubali. This may poses a profound ethical question in risk of reductionism- disparaging racism based on colour by portraying in a softer form of hatred, or using Dalit marginalization merely as substitute of Shakespearean plot. The risk is Vishal Bhardwaj being an upper-caste filmmaker ventriloquizing half-Dalit hero which may reduce Dalit identity to cinematic trope. The question remains, is Omkara a real protagonist or a metaphorical representative of Othello's Blackness? The film might be charged with the very appropriation Spivak critiques; hiding the subaltern's voice under pre-existing Western-derived structure (Spivak, 1988). Therefore, Omakara's ethical justification depends on whether it uses caste merely as an alternative Shakespearean plot or breaks free from the structure to create something new.

But after careful study of Omkara, it is evident that the films do not simply compare these two injustices nor trivialize it. Rather, it uses one as a source to highlight the psychological and social aspects of the other. The film's ethical stance is to narrate the darkest human potential towards prejudice and hatred prevalent in Indian society. The film's ethical justification is achieved through the deep characterization of Omkara by making him psychologically creative and influential in nature. Omkara referred as 'ganda' (dirty) not merely an irritant for Langda's jealousy but he himself absorbs it due to his deeply personal insecurity about Dolly's faithfulness towards him. He struggles to believe he is worthy of Dolly's love due to his half-Dalit identity. Bhardwaj rejects all the critiques here by triggering his internal insecurities due to social injustices faced by Dalits. Therefore, caste becomes the core cause of the tragedy, not just its setting.

Besides, the movie uses another way of presenting a group identity that may be seen as 'strategic essentialism', a notion Spivak accepts as an instance of having to simplify a group's political identity for the sake of a quicker and more efficient political action. Although she is sceptical of the term, it nicely illustrates the temporary reduction of a complex group's moral ideals to one political or rhetorical use (Spivak, 1990; 1993). Bhardwaj here selects the concept of caste to be at the forefront of the film and hence the director used it as a tool to discuss the nature of power and malice in antagonistic post-colonial India. Omkara becomes one of the main points where we can qualify power of Othello just as a literary work selecting social division in India as a theme to replace racial politics, caste instead of Venice's North Indian gang rivalries and the transformation of aristocratic tensions into regional power struggles, are the important factors Bhardwaj tries to unveil. On the other hand, he still uses the harsh truth of caste discrimination as a mirror to show a greater theme of the movie: to the violence that occurs if an old hierarchy is disturbed by a single worthy person. The evil of LangdaTyagi is so overwhelming just because it is anchored in a socially recognizable rationale - the resentment of a high-caste person at having to work under a low-caste master. This makes the wickedness more understandable and, at the same time, more frightening than the evil of Iago which is known as motiveless malignity. The ethical translation is, therefore, not in claiming caste to be equal to race but to show how any strict social hierarchy, whether of race, caste or class, can give rise to the same toxic resents and allow the same rhetorical aids for manipulation and destruction.

In the end, the main ethical acceptance of Omkara's relocation is that it is productive rather than reductive. It doesn't just say that the experience of a black man in Renaissance Venice is the same as that of a low-caste man in Uttar Pradesh. This would be absurd from the point of view of history and sociology, and offensive in terms of ethics. It rather states that the tragic opportunity in Othello's work is the one that can be experienced by the Indian context as well. The transposition succeeded because sexual jealousy if mixed with societal prejudice becomes more dangerous which eventually becomes the

reason for downfall of Omkara. The fragile mindset of an outsider who achieves power but never get accepted, speaks of the human tragic psychology. The movie masterfully portrays an ageless story of love which eventually gets annihilated by caste.

By rooting Omkara's downfall in an Indian social reality, Bhardwaj accomplishes two significant things. First, he has created a tragedy which is immensely local and true to its setting. Simultaneously, it carries all the essence of Shakespearean scope and power. Therefore, it manages to resonate with the universal themes of the original play. Thus, in effect, the film Omkara makes a post-colonial adaptation of the highest ethical commitment, i.e. it does not only reverberate the master's voice but also responds to it, thereby opening up a new and necessary debate on power, identity and tragedy in the contemporary world.

Bollywood's Liberation of Shakespeare from Colonial Elitism

The journey of William Shakespeare in India remains a contradiction of great proportions. During his life, as Ben Jonson pointed out, he was a Universalist (Jonson, 2003) however; the colonial agenda gradually changed him into an icon solely dealing with cultural elitism. The works of the Bard was used as one of the characteristics to separate the "civilized" ones from the "non-civilized" ones, a windmill of the English curriculum for educating Indians. As Macaulay rightly commented "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste" (Macaulay, 1835). For centuries, Shakespeare was deliberately hidden away in universities that were considered prestigious, and only performed or narrated in English-speaking plays. It was his language (Early Modern English) which acted as a fence dividing the rich from the rest of society. He had become something like an emblem of high culture and far away from the lively and anarchic daily life of ordinary Indians. It is from the same background of elitism that Bhardwaj's Omkara and in general Bollywood adaptations gather their emotion and engage in the most massive counter-action by resorting to the means of popular cinema to democratize Shakespeare's works.

One of the Bhardwaj attributes is his linguistic and cultural transition which was done in a very bold and revolutionary manner. He definitely doesn't do it by means of subtitles only, but rather wraps these plays in the coarsest dialect of the Uttar Pradesh badlands. The noble and generals' one-time graceful iambic pentameter is replaced by the raw and often vulgar slang of gangsters and politicians. This is not a weakening of Shakespeare but rather a strengthening one. Giving the hysterics of Othello in an everyday tongue, Bhardwaj claims the playwright is not an English-speaking elite's sole possession, instead, they share the universal concepts of passion, envy, political greed, and treacheries which are human stories and naturally, people will understand them best in the language of which they are watching the film.

This process shakes up the whole idea of a "neutral" or "pure" Shakespearean performance. As a result of colonial rule, Royal Shakespeare Company production has been considered the one and only authentic standard for English literature. While adapting Shakespeare into Bollywood, it simply cannot carry such 'pureness' as Bollywood flaunts its hybridity by combining drama, music, love, and action into a single form without any hesitation. A song like "Beedi Jalaile" in Omkara is a perfect example of this blend. The songs in the movie do not act as distractions from story, rather reinforces crude and sensual scenes in Shakespeare's own plays. Bhardwaj uses vibrant, popular tropes of gangster and political dramas to show that tragedy is not just devastating but theatrical in nature as well. Ratna Pathak Shah one of the finest actors of Bollywood said in one of her interviews that Shakespeare should not be done in England as they are so reverential towards him which makes it dull. Bhardwaj demonstrates that the works of Shakespeare are not just relics of the past which is to be preserved under glass but they are

to be transformed and reinterpreted according to the audience to reach to the mass. While doing this Bollywood take Shakespeare's greatness and liberates the colonial elitism. Delivering movies like *Omkaara*, Bhardwaj has successfully delivered the Shakespearean works to the mass in a form that acceptable, understandable and embraced by everyone. This successfully proves that the works of the 'upstart crow' were destined to resonate across the globe.

Conclusion

The magic of William Shakespeare is not in untouchability of his texts but how it can connect with everyone by reinventing him in various forms. This helps post-colonial adaptations like Vishal Bhardwaj's movies like *Maqbool*, *Omkaara* and *Haider*, a big success. This paper particularly argued how *Omkaara* has moved beyond the story of fidelity to a story of psychological and social consequences of that. Bhardwaj has creatively showcased a Shakespearean play through the lens of post-colonialism not by rejecting him but by accepting his narratives to narrate local truths. It shows that the adaptations that really hit home are the ones that act like mirrors, reflecting back on the past to question what's happening now. In a way, it allows Shakespeare's work to break free and connect with today's world in a meaningful way.

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