



Decoding Masculinities: Reimagining Othello as Omkara

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Abstract:

Race and caste have historically been studied as comparable systems of stratification, but that comparison has also been a subject of critique. In fact, since the sixties, there has been an active decline in the practice of identifying similarities between the two systems (Beteille 490). Drawing upon Andre Beteille's argument, "inequalities of caste are illuminated in the same way as those of race by consideration of gender," this paper argues that reimagining Othello as Omkara works not just because race and caste work as 'cultural equivalents' but because, at the core of it, there are shared masculine notions of gender that align Othello with Omkara, in the same way Othello's mind works in tandem with Iago's insinuations. It is gender, rather than race, that allows a 'faithful' adaptation of Shakespeare's play.

Keywords: Adaptation, Masculinities, Shakespeare, Othello, Omkara, Vishal Bhardwaj.

Introduction

As soon as a text is picked up for translation/adaptation, one needs to answer a few questions: how close is the translation to the original; has the translation managed to keep the spirit of the source text alive (or not); what are the points of departure; and how justified are the divergences. So, when Vishal Bhardwaj chooses William Shakespeare's *Othello* and sets it in the hinterlands of North India, his immediate concern is not only how to make *Othello* relevant for his contemporary viewership but also how to keep intact the essence of a text that became a source of inspiration for him. He might change the location, turn the language into a local dialect, and fill the in-between spaces of the play with song-and-dance sequences, making it a Bollywood blockbuster. However, Othello has to stand for the jealous agony for which Shakespeare created him in the original; Iago has to wield the power of machinations; and Desdemona has to play the role of a victim who, till the end, remains ignorant of the manipulations that destroyed her marital bliss. When, for the Shakespearean audience, Othello's skin colour is an essential marker of difference- he is the 'other' that the 'self' refuses to find trustworthy, desirable, and acceptable- caste, it seems, would be an obvious choice in the Indian context. Moreover, it is in this choice that we see Bhardwaj demonstrate his mastery of the nuances of a Shakespearean play. In Shakespearean plays, one often finds gaps and spaces that complicate the text's meaning, resisting simple, direct interpretation. In *Othello*, that complexity comes from the question- exactly how dark is Othello? Moreover, the answer to that question completely changes the nature and meaning of the play. So, even when caste seems like an appropriate 'cultural equivalent' in this case, the real difference comes from when Bhardwaj chooses to make his Othello, Omkara, not a person of a different caste from his female protagonist, in which case it would have become a case of caste rivalry, but a 'half-caste' Brahmin whose identity cannot be clearly defined.

Male (Sexual) Identity and the Anxiety of Being “The Half-Caste”

This paper begins by examining the question of male (sexual) identity that constitutes and establishes Othello/Omkara as a character worthy of being the subject of a tragedy and of the play/film that unfolds the drama of his downfall. It argues that caste complicates Omkara’s identity, the way race defines and forces Othello to act in a certain (jealous and violent) way.

When one attempts to find out how Bharadwaj ‘decodes’ Shakespeare for his Indian audience, a dialogue which becomes the starting point of discussion is “*shadi se koi aaulad nahi janami iss ghar me, salo tak. Fir baba ko ishak hua aur uss ishak se janame hum, dusri biradari ki thi maa isliye jaat see aadha kehte hai humme*” (“no child was born in this family from a marriage, for years. Then my father fell in love, and that is how I was born. My mother was of some other caste; that is why they call me half-caste Brahmin”ⁱ (*Omkara* 50:38- 51:04)ⁱⁱ. It relates to what Randolph Splitter calls the “preoedipal” anxiety about identity, in the case of Othello (17).

Dipanker Gupta points out that, though the caste system has collapsed in the country due to the breakdown of a closed village economy and the rise of democratic politics, caste identities have only solidified in the process. Citing Dumont, he suggests that caste is an ideological system in which the entire society participates willingly (Gupta 411). Bhardwaj’s movie begins with this. When Omkara might be “Omi bhaiya” for those around him, they are all not only aware but conscious of his identity as a “half-caste.” Thus, there is not enough information for Rajju to know that somebody is stealing away his bride; Tyagi makes it a point to mention that it is the “*aadha bahman*” who is taking away his woman (*Omkara* 4:35- 4:40). This is not an affront to Rajju and his manhood alone, but an insult to his entire caste. The same idea is reinforced by Dolly’s father, Raghunath Mishra, whose opposition to Omkara lies in the fact that he cannot marry his daughter outside his caste- “*apne phool ko uske haath kaise de*

du? Jaati ka bhi to antar hai” (“how can I give away my innocent child? After all, there is the difference of caste”) (*Omkara* 14:26-14:33). The idea of “*khun*” or “blood” is important here because, in the context of the caste system, maintaining the purity of bloodline or caste is extremely important. Any departure from the sanctioned system not only makes one’s bloodline ‘polluted,’ but it also costs one a loss of identity. Omkara may be a “half-Brahmin,” but that does not make him a member of the Brahmin community; he will be forever the one whose blood has been polluted by the strains of a woman of a different caste. In fact, it is the stigma of losing his daughter to someone like Omkara, a “half-caste” and hence a nobody in the social order, that puts Raghunath to shame among his own caste people- “*biradari me naak kati*” (“I will not be able to show my face within my community”) (*Omkara* 14:21-14:24). Thus, the movie begins on a note where Omkara’s identity poses a problem for him in terms of who he is and where he belongs, something which Iago, Brabantio, and Roderigo set up for Othello in the first few pages of Shakespeare’s play.

The ‘Cunning’ and ‘Deceitful’ Women in the World of ‘Honourable’ Men

Othello, for sure, is a play about race, but what permeates the entire subtext, and drives the action forward, is a persistent sexual anxiety that dominates this otherwise masculine world. Mark Breitenberg writes that there is a long historical tradition of preoccupation with female chastity that explains the contradictions and anxieties constitutive of the patriarchal system that Othello inhabits (377). He places Othello’s doubts, and the violence they engender, within the context of ‘paternity anxiety’ that teaches distrust of women and promulgates male sexual jealousy (370-380). This paper further extends this idea to explain the anxieties that constitute Omkara as a character, showcasing that the key to this cultural adaptation lies in understanding and decoding shared masculine notions of gender that align the distant worlds of Othello and Omkara.

Dipanker Gupta points out, “pure ritual hierarchy operates only when backed by wealth and power” (409). So, Omkara, the *bahubali* (strongman) of Tiwari bhai sahab, the would-be candidate for political elections, has nothing to fear; rather, in this position, he demands respect from those around. Therefore, caste-based insinuations can penetrate his mind and senses, exposing deep-seated insecurities only when an external stimulus is present (Tyagi’s devious machinations). Omkara is the region’s warlord, but he is also skilled at scheming and framing his opponents. Very early in the movie, we see him erasing competition by using the threat of a sex scandal. Thus, Omkara is not unaware of the manipulations that are meant to ruin him in the future.

It is this knowledge of a man’s political world that finds its way into his domestic life. We see that even before Omkara has started his life with Dolly, Raghunath warns him of “*aurat ka triya-charitra*” (“the ways of women”) (*Omkara* 20:46-20:51). If the distrust of Brabantio comes from a culture where Eve is held responsible for using guile on Adam and leading him to the fall, then “*aurat ka triya-charitra*” has its own cultural connotations. When the song “*naina thag lege*” (“these eyes will scam you”) (*Omkara* 16:36- 19:13) has to be read in terms of how a woman can bewitch a man, Omkara’s jest of “*roop me tantar-mantar*” (“black-magic of beauty”) (*Omkara* 1:14:48) hints at the culture which sees women with doubt and suspicion. This is further strengthened by the reference to “*Dashrat ka vada*” (“Dashrat’s promise”) (*Omkara* 1:21-1:30), in the little humming that Omkara does for Dolly, which immediately brings into mind how Kekai, in the *Ramayana*, misuses Dashrat’s “*vada*” or promise to realise her evil intentions. So, we notice that Omkara’s understanding of political intrigue and plotting fuses with his general distrust of women, which he has acquired from his society and culture. Thus, one finds space for a ‘tragic flaw’ that will lead to the ultimate fall.

What is noticeable here is that as an individual, Omkara not only identifies with but has also imbibed his society’s language. This culture teaches him to think in a particular way. What

is that way? Trust not the women who play on men, mislead them with their wiles and appearances. Significantly, Dolly asks Omkara to forgive Keshav exactly when Omkara is singing “*Dashrat ka vada.*” She is play-acting to have her demands met, employing both her beauty and the moment to suit her purpose. Here, not only Omkara but the audience as well is implicated when they catch the hint thrown in by Tyagi- “*khushi shadi ki jyada hai ya maaf ki*” (“joy is more on account of marriage or because of forgiveness”) (*Omkara* 1:20:31-1:20:36). It is not Omkara alone who believes that a woman who is capable of cheating her father is liable to cheat anybody and everybody- “*jo ladki apne baap ko thag sakti hai wo kisi aur ki sagi kya hogi*” (“a woman who can deceive her father cannot be truthful to anyone else”) (*Omkara* 20:54-20:59)- but all those in the theatre hall, who share this suspicion of women. However, it is not in such cases alone that the credibility of a woman is doubted; she is an object of disbelief in general, as Indu puts it, “*hum apne ghar, bar, naate sab tyag ke aap logo ke sansar me nage hatho chale aate hai, agni se bhi nikal jave na to bhi sage nai thage hi kahlawe hai*” (“we leave our homes, houses, and everything else aside to walk empty handed in your worlds, but even if go through the test of fire, we will still be called not one of own blood, but the one who deceives”) (*Omkara* 2:05:17-2:05:42). So when Tyagi paints the picture of Dolly and Keshav having a good time together, and Iago torments Othello with images of Desdemona being unfair to him, it does not come across as a surprise to both Omkara and Othello, who have heard those around them talking of women in such terms many times before, and have accepted it all, in whatever way it was told. Hence, Stephen Greenblatt correctly suggests that Iago and Othello are linked by shared values about women and sexuality even when they are differentiated by the logic of ‘self’/ ‘other’- “Iago, to arouse Othello, must talk a language that Othello knows as well as he, a language implicit in the nature of Othello’s love as the idealisation of his private property in Desdemona” (cited in Newman 149). So that when she betrays this situation, she cannot be forgiven but punished with her life.

Of Male Sexuality and Female Transgression: The ‘Illegitimate’ Child and the ‘Illicit’ Affair

As stated earlier, race and caste have historically been subjects of comparison, a comparison that has also been frowned upon; it becomes illuminative when gender is taken into account (Beteille 489). Male sexual jealousy and anxiety around women’s bodily purity translate into issues of ‘paternity anxiety’ and moral panic that unsettle well-established social categories of race and caste. In this final section, the paper examines the male connection that helps establish Othello/Omkara as ‘tragic’ subjects, thereby justifying actions that would otherwise be subject to critique.

An important question that arises from the preceding section is why the text must devise a route of suspicion, jealousy, and distrust to comment on racial difference. Critics have argued that these are the elements that mark out Othello’s ‘otherness’ in the text and make him the racial opponent. In fact, E. A. J. Honigsmann writes that when Shakespeare often makes characters who have complex psychologies, it is not atypical of him when he makes Othello “a mass of contradictions” (20). He is gentle but treats Desdemona savagely; while growing suspicious of his wife, he completely believes Iago, and when easily persuaded by Iago, he does not even care to listen to the woman of his life. The problem in this particular case arises from the fact that emotional volatility has been chosen to characterise Othello as the gullible, superstitious, murderous ‘other.’ He further strengthens his idea by the question “how many of the other tragic heroes weep as copiously as the Moor?” (20). The caste system works on the same lines. So, when Omkara elopes with Raghunath’s daughter, the father blames not Omkara but the blood running in his veins- “*bhul gaya tha ke tu bahman to hai par aadha, aadha khun to tere andar uss kanjari ka bhi hai na harami saale*” (“I forgot that you are a brahmin, but only a half-brahmin, half of your blood belongs to that *kanjari* woman, you bastard!”) (*Omkara* 10:21-10:32). A person’s acts and life are repeatedly judged based on his/her origins. Caste,

thus, becomes part of one's everyday lived reality that seeps into the mind, without one being consciously aware of it. Thus, when at the end Omkara jibes at Dolly, suggesting the possibility of an illicit relationship, with the sentence "*kahi koi bacha-vacha to nahi thahar gaya na?*" ("are you pregnant or something?") (*Omkara* 2:51:43), the audience is immediately reminded of the protagonist's own status as a child born out of an illegitimate relationship. His comment deeply reflects his subconscious awareness of his status in society as someone who belongs nowhere. Thus, it becomes clear that his jealousy is rooted in caste anxiety. It is not only male anger at the idea of being betrayed by a woman, but also an indication that the male protagonist is insecure about his own worthiness to be chosen by the woman desired by all. The idea is strengthened by Omkara himself when he says, "*ya tu bohot badi lul hai ya bohot badi churail (jo tu mere pyar me pad gai)*" "either you are completely stupid, or you are a witch, that you fell in love with someone like me" (*Omkara* 1:12:31-1:12:37).

The distinction between *anuloma* (a relationship between a man of a superior and a woman of an inferior caste) and *pratiloma* (a relationship between a woman of a superior and a man of an inferior caste) unions is useful for understanding this context. The former is accepted despite its contempt, while the latter is subject to severe criticism and repudiated on moral grounds. Beteille explains this difference in treatment through the distinction between 'illegitimate' and 'illicit' (497). While a man's crossing of socially sanctioned boundaries is the object of criticism, it is still acceptable. A woman's transgression, on the other hand, creates a moral panic and anxiety in society as it communicates the presence of an active and assertive sexuality on the part of a woman. So, while Omkara is troubled by his status as an 'illegitimate' child, Dolly's transgression is more problematic because she is entering into an 'illicit' affair. This troubling female sexuality seems to be at the centre of the plot, whether it is in the songs, the explicit intimate scenes, or the use of abusive language or *gaalis* in the film. The use of abuse particularly captures the play's auditory aspects. Even though Othello keeps on claiming

“I will see before I doubt” (*Othello* 3.3.190), Iago has already entered Othello’s mind through his ears (Wall 361). *Omkaara* makes clever use of abuses that combine male sexual jealousy with anxieties about caste. For example: “*main jhuta to kutte ka jana, sachha to teri ma aka khasam*” (“if I am a liar then I am born of a bitch, if I am truthful then I am your mother’s lover”) (*Omkaara* 5:28-5:33). All these suggest a deep sense of anxiety about one’s caste and sexuality.

Shakespeare’s text exploits the topic to its full potential when it makes Desdemona not a daughter who disobeys but the one who transgresses boundaries, as Tennenhouse points out, “if Jacobean drama proves one thing...it is that sexual relations are always political and that Desdemona’s desire is politically subversive” (cited in Loomba 56). So, when Desdemona “hears” and “devours” Othello’s discourses with a “greedy ear,” she becomes a “sexual subject who hears and desires, and that desire is punished because the non-specular, or non-phallic sexuality it displays is frightening and dangerous” (Newman 152). It is not an insignificant detail when Bharadwaj shows his female protagonist entering into a sexual relationship with Omkara even before they are married, for when she has freed herself from the norms of patriarchal order, by leaving her father’s choice behind, she has the freedom to live the way she likes, and it is only after marriage that she again becomes liable to the male code of justice which leads her to her death. The film, however, gives ample space to female desires and their expression. The choice of *kamarband* (waist jewel), in place of the handkerchief, is interesting as it sexualises the very object which is supposed to be the marker of Dolly’s chastity. The desiring women, however, are a cause of concern, a threat to the existing social order, and therefore their transgressions need to be contained or punished.

Edward A. Snow argues that at a subconscious level, the insistence on punishment for adultery springs out of the disgust for the act of sexuality itself; desire is sinful and must be suppressed. Moreover, the bloodstained bedsheet at the end symbolises the bloodstained

wedding bed that speaks of lost sexual innocence (389–391). In *Omkara*, the profusion of red is not coincidental. It is a deliberate choice that captures: Omkara's anger; the significance of red in Hindu weddings (Dolly is in her wedding attire, pleading for her love and sexual purity); and the act of transgression by the female protagonist (who is already guilty for being a desiring subject).

Conclusion: Masculine Justice

There is a certain absurdity to the logic of a 'tragedy' which manipulates sympathy to favour the "honourable murderer" (Shakespeare qtd by Snow 388). Within the court of men, the voice of the "honest" man prevails over any claims of "honesty" on the part of "chaste and true" Desdemona (Shakespeare qtd by Splitter 20). What facilitates a faithful adaptation of *Othello* as *Omkara* is not a simple translation of race into caste, but a shared masculine understanding of women, and men's fictive narratives about women. Reimagining *Othello* as *Omkara* thus requires not a subtle translation of racial insecurities into caste anxieties, but a decoding of shared notions of masculinities that define women in similar ways.

Notes:

ⁱ All translations from Hindi were done by the author.

ⁱⁱ All film citations follow the MLA 9th edition. Timestamp ranges from the beginning to the end of the sequence.

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