

The Sacred and the Profane in *Omkara*: Vishal Bhardwaj's Hindi Adaptation of *Othello*

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Abstract (E): The essay focuses on cultural translation of cinematic emotion in Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara* (2006). By analyzing Bhardwaj's use of filmic micro-genres of religious ritual, concept, and story through visual imagery and music, we see how *Omkara* alludes to the history of Indian and non-Indian film and much like the way Shakespeare's drama does with an array of other texts. More specifically, the essay articulates Bhardwaj's linking of tragic love with violence in the world's most populous democracy.

Abstract (F): Cet article s'intéresse particulièrement à la traduction culturelle de l'émotion filmique dans *Omkara* de Vishal Bhardwaj(2006). En analysant la manière dont Bhardwaj se sert de certains microgenres cinématographiques des rites religieux et comment il en articule le concept et l'histoire à travers les images et la musique, nous démontrons qu'*Omkara* se réfère à l'histoire du cinéma indien mais aussi non-indien de la même façon que le théâtre de Shakespeare renvoie à toute une panoplie d'autres textes. Plus spécifiquement, l'article regarde de plus près la manière dont Bhardway rattache le thème de l'amour tragique au thème de la violence dans la plus grande démocratie du monde.

Keywords: Cinematic Emotion, Micro-genre, Emotion Cues, Hindi Cinema, *Omkara*, Vishal Bhardwaj, *Maqbool*, *Othello*, Shakespeare

Article

What happens to Shakespeare's *Othello* when it is translated into a 2006 Hindi film? A Hindi film, even when it is not a typical Bollywood film, requires set themes, character types, and the almost mandatory song-dance sequences. Sometimes in nonmainstream Hindi films, such as in *Angoor* (an adaptation of *Comedy of Errors*), song and dance sequences are dropped or incorporated into the story world. Thus we see that in *Angoor*, Luciana's counterpart is a singer, and one of the Dromios is in the habit of parodying classical Hindi songs and ragas whenever he is in a tight spot. This is how the filmmaker can have new songs written for Luciana's concerts, while old songs (alluding to other films) give an inter-cultural color to comic intrigue and parody. As one of the early examples of Shakespeare adaptations to Hindi film, *Angoor* might have served as a model for Bhardwaj. However, Bhardwaj was a composer and music director before he became a film director. Hence, he naturally incorporated song-dance into the story world by changing Bianca into Biloo Chaman Bahar, a career courtesan, character prototype drawn from the celebrated courtesan micro-genre used widely in Indian film. Moreover, the courtesan story is not only a micro-genre, internationally known films like *Pakizah* (1971) and *Umrao Jaan* (1981) have established the courtesan film as a major genre in Indian film, so that

Billoo's character in *Omkara* evokes a range of cinematic emotion scripts, updates them, and thus helps to anchor the Othello story in India's cultural and social history.

For instance, a key song-dance in *Pakizah*, "inhee logon ne cheena dupatta mera," (these men have torn away my veil), a complaint about men who have deprived the courtesan of social respectability (Allen 27) –is allusively transformed into the famous beedi song for Bhardwaj's Billoo. Unlike the heroine of *Pakizah*, who is lamenting the loss of her innocence (and chastity), Billoo is a working girl--working all over the town and the country. Her 'beedi' song invites one of these men (*Omkara*'s men) to remove her veil (and clothing) to see what is in her heart/liver (jigger), to light their beedi (cigar) with its fire. Thus, we see that in 1971 the courtesan was the "chaste" woman cheated by the socio-economic fate of her being born as a courtesan's daughter in feudal society, where men exercise their entitlements to land, resources and women. In 1981, Umroa Jaan is envisioned as the young girl from the country, stolen and sold into slavery in the city by thieves masking as traders. As a revision to these stories in 2006, Bhardwaj's Billoo-Bianca is a woman with agency, though unlike the others she is not the protagonist; it is not her story. It is Dolly's story, though her image is insistently cross-cut with Billoo's. While Billoo's profanity at one level presents a counterpoint to the political profanities of *Omkara* and his men (as she entertains all, she is attached to only one of them, Kesu); her Dionysian sexuality presents an intoxicating contrast to Dolly's Apollonian dream of marriage to the one she chose: *Omkara*. Bhardwaj's *Omkara* is the story of a small town college girl who dared to choose! As the consequences of her choice work out narratively and cinematically, she emblemizes the desire of millions of Indians to choose their governments at the state, and at the center. At the level of emotion, the contrast between what Billoo configures and what Dolly configures is nowhere more evident than in the visceral sexuality of the Billoo's public performance based songs and the delicate sentiments encapsulated in Dolly's solitary lyrics accompanied by visual imagery of domestic spaces, alternately filled with joy and bereft of joy. All that is communicated by Desdemona when she remembers her mother's maid, Barbary's willow song (the song of heartbreak), is given expansive coverage in *Omkara*, but not by means of melodrama. Bhardwaj's Billoo's songs and exuberant dances are as much a corrective to Sahib Jan, the heroine of *Pakizah*, as she is a corrective to the heartbroken Barbary (and Desdemona), an enhancement of Shakespeare's Cypriot courtesan, Bianca. In addition to these song sequences that develop character, tell a story, enhance mood, other musical motifs in *Omkara* are presented non-diegetically (vocal and instrumental) as essential aesthetic coordinates to the cinematography of *Omkara* (on the aesthetics of the "song-dance interlude" in Indian film in general, see Hogan 160-193). Reference to the cinematic exuberance of the song-dance motif at the outset of this discussion is not intended to suggest that Bhardwaj's films are musicals; they are cultural, historical and political treatises on contemporary India.

In "doing" Shakespeare, Bhardwaj has followed Shakespeare's example in using older texts to invent something truly new that addresses a range of concerns and anxiety patterns of his own time. Thus, Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* (and adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*) takes up the issue of drug trafficking and other crime in India, focusing on the Mumbai underworld that, none the less, presents a very wholesome glimpse of Muslim-India, the culture and traditions, with specific reference to Sufi practices. When Abba Ji (in *Maqbool*) says to a weapons dealer, "...but Mumbai is my Beloved (mashauka) and cannot be traded for any amount of money"; this utterance is a corrective to the general perception that Muslims do not love their cities in India, and thus, they do not love the country. Bhardwaj's *Omkara* focuses on the Hindu tradition and uses many of its symbols, colors and iconography, one of which is his transcription of

Shakespearean names to Hindu names that orient the viewer into regional and caste identities of the characters. They also have metaphysical resonance because of being names of deities with whom Indians feel an identity based connection that has nothing to do with belief, but concerns individual dispositions and other scripts associated with deities who, through iconography, festival, song and seasonal ritual, are part of lived life in India.

In the following discussion, I will focus on Bhardwaj's naming of his characters, its ethical and emotive import and also consider how he relocates Othello and Desdemona's love and marriage in the context of Indian tradition and modernity as it impacts love and marriage in today's Indian society where girls have a measure of freedom to choose, while arranged marriage is still a moral imperative. In the film, Dolly's (Desdemona) Mishra's marriage is arranged by her father. Roderigo's counterpart, Rajan, is no jilted lover, but a publically humiliated bridegroom whose first conference with Ishwar Tyagi (Iago) occurs when Rajan is still incongruously decked up in a UP or Bihari middle class bridegroom's finery and flowers. For her part as an unwilling bride, Dolly goes along with the engagement and other pre-wedding rites only to have Omkara abduct her on the day of her wedding. The mythic allusion to Arjuna, the great warrior in the *Mahabharata* war, who similarly abducts Krishna's sister, Subhadra (with Krishna's help and Subhadra willingness), cannot be missed by a vast majority of Indian viewers, especially because Omkara has been introduced to (through image and song) as the "great warrior." Again, unlike in the original play, sexual consummation for the runaways occurs before marriage (since the abduction counts as some sort of a marriage) and the murder follows the formal wedding at the end, a Vedic ceremony replete with ritual grace and a colorful spectacle. The corpse of the bride atop the bridal swing, with the flowers, the red sari, facial decorations, henna, as the swing sways showing and hiding the white robed corpse of the groom composes the tragic *denouement* (see figure 1). As in the original play (and as in *Romeo and Juliet*), there is a lot of foreshadowing imagery that augurs death while Dolly, having taken a gamble on her life, is eagerly waiting for her marriage to Omkara.



Figure 1 Corpses of Omkara and Dolly: Red (color of marriage and love) and white (color of death)

Weddings in Hindi movies function as emotion-micro genres or micro-scripts that people carry from their real world experiences into their response to films (see Smith 41-64), eliciting a range of emotions, anxieties, concerns as well as the viewers' own episodic memories of significant life events. In his discussion of the "mood cue approach to filmic emotion," Smith

says that film have to first “create a predisposition towards experiencing emotion” (42). This is done, among other things, through the use of micro-genres. In this context, Smith defines genre as “a narrative and iconographic pattern” that specifies “patterns of emotional address” (42). According to him, “the most significant for emotion” are not the broad genres and our expectations related to them, but “genre micro-scripts we have gathered from real-world experience and from encounters with other genre texts, scripts for feuding lovers, showdowns, fight sequences, romantic reconciliations, chases and stalkings” (48). These scripts predispose the viewer towards a certain kind of emotional response, as he or she enters into active inter-subjective involvement in filmic events. Though Smith does not include weddings among his short list of real-life micro-genres that predispose a viewer towards a certain kind of filmic emotion, on Indian TV and in Hindi film, weddings (with focus on different moments and phases) play a significant role. Anchored in this genre micro-script, *Omkara* begins with an interrupted wedding and ends with a wedding that is followed by several deaths, while there is no staged wedding in *Othello*, only references to the interrupted first night in Cyprus and focus on the marriage bed, that, thought to have been polluted by the act of infidelity, becomes the scene of crime at the end. In *Omkara*, the time in-between the interrupted nuptial and the ill fated wedding, through insistent and deft crosscutting, is linked to campaign activities of politicians and their gangster-activists who consistently use violent and criminal means to achieve political ends. Clearly, the changes Bhardwaj makes in the original story do not alter the basic plot line, nor crucial parts of dialogue that become nodes for plot transformation and changes in characters’ moods, mood congruent emotions and mind set; he only changes the emotion micro-genres or scripts at critical moments. In this adaptation, I will argue that Bhardwaj’s aesthetics is consistent with *laws of emotion* as they are discussed by cognitive psychologists and as they operate in stories and films that always use many micro-genres (or scripts) to elicit emotion (such as little melodramatic scripts of sacrifice and/or comic segments in tragedies, and so forth).

In Indian culture, for instance, a bride and groom, in ceremonial and ritual terms become for that one day, a god and a goddess (Parvati and Shiva). In this way, the wedding ceremony itself, though it involves material negotiations of all sorts, invokes a micro-genre of sacred time and its efficacy through Vedic ritual that is centuries old. Thus, the deaths of a vibrantly visualized bride and groom in *Omkara* signifies end of sacred time, of myth, an end to meaning that myth gives to life. In a sense, the entire film, *Omkara*, is a ritual of undoing of all myths (all ideas of order) and it persuades a horror-stuck look at material history: unredeemed, unrecoverable in representation. Shakespeare’s play, as an early modern tragedy, imagined and viewed at a time *when the world has not fallen apart and the center still holds*, does not end in moral despair. There is the *demi-devil*, “the Spartan dog” who can be held accountable for the “tragic loading of this bed” (5.2. 365-367). In contrast, Iago’s counterpart in *Omkara* cannot be entirely held accountable, not only because he has a motive for malevolence, but because of various other effects: his speech patterns, the visual imagery that surrounds him and others, the entire repertoire of emotion micro-genres used in this film and the laws of emotion they invoke.

As part of a larger theory of mind, *laws of emotion* refer to the work of Nico Frijda, Ekman, Frieson, Ortony, and others who contend that narrative implicitly uses laws of emotion to establish connections between discourse, utterance, character, imagery and motif. They also contend that the human mind and memory are organized like stories; hence, stories, in any form (written, shown on stage, or screen) unravel laws of emotion ((Tan 116-135) in pretty much the

same way as classical psychoanalysis thought narrative unravels the unconscious, or as social theories maintain that they unravel economic relations and social hierarchy.

Drawing on the appraisal theory of emotions, my specific analyses in the following discussion refer to two primary laws of emotion: the *law of concern* and the *law of closure*, following Nico Frijda's formulation of the laws of emotion and their relation to imagination and aesthetic form. The basic tenet of Appraisal Theory is that emotions are not elicited by life events by themselves, but by how events are appraised in terms of their impact on goals, purposes and desires. Events are appraised in terms of valence, based in aversiveness and attractiveness of effects, affects and possibilities: their being either desirable or undesirable. In Shakespeare studies, the relevance of cognitive theory is shown by work such as is famously done by Gail Kern Paster, her innovative formulations of the motif of 'humoral subjectivity' and its essentially embodied nature (Paster 6-7). The language of humors is not irrelevant to the tradition in which Bhardwaj is making the film, because traditional Indian medicine, Aurveda, centers on the humors of the body and their impact on health, mood, mood congruent emotion as well as the constants of personality. In fact, the visceral sensuality and bawdiness of Billoo's songs, as well as the love melancholy, are humor based and set up a contrast with the more abstract sense of sacred time invoked by the wedding ceremony. In the following discussion, my use of appraisal theory assumes that aesthetic forms and discourses build on appraisal models that are used, consciously and unconsciously, to appraise life events for their attractiveness and aversiveness potential and outcome. Once certain types of evaluations are made, either spontaneously or after deliberation, emotions and emotive moods are elicited that impact action outcomes. A study of *Omkara*, from this perspective is relevant not only because this theory has potential for broad applications to narrative and fiction film, but also because the traditional Indian aesthetics of *rasa* (aesthetic emotion) and *rasadhvani* (language processes associated with elicitation of emotion) is a pre-modern account of emotion and narrative that codifies art emotion in systematic ways. It is an aesthetic that has influenced Indian cinema, as it is part of lived life in India (Pandit 78-94). Furthermore, the connections between *rasadhvani* theory and cognitive theory of art and emotion have been made by cognitive theorists such as Oatley (152-153). In the following pages, I will limit myself to situating *Omkara* in relation to the emotion laws of concern and closure in the context of cognitive theory.

What is in A Name: the Law of Concern

Like the original play, the Hindi film presents a tragic vision, imbued with moral questioning that leads to a philosophical reflection on domestic violence occurring in a broader context of socio-political violence, especially criminalization of electoral politics in many regions in India. This context relates to concerns that people have, activating the *law of concern*, defined as a cognitive appraisal process that elicits "emotions" with regard to "to events as they are important to the individual's concerns" (Fridja 7). These concerns can be very narrow and self centered, or broader as our concerns about bad economy, health care reform, outsourcing, and so forth. In Shakespeare's play, the broader context of violence is deliberately muted, or occluded, and the focus is on the domestic realm, while in the film *Omkara*'s direct engagement in violent acts is given comprehensive visual coverage, and makes up a much larger portion of the plot. Shakespeare, clearly, addresses concerns regarding inter-racial marriage, sex, and love, and the play strives to show these emotions as natural, not unnatural. The focus is on presenting a counterpoint to racist ideologies about human interaction, especially intimate human

exchanges between men and women. As one would expect, Bhardwaj's film is not concerned with the race issue, but with the issue of violence in general, as it affects public and private life. In a sense, *Omkara* resolves critical disputes about the exact racial identity of Othello, as articulated by Rymer in his disquiet about the changes Shakespeare made in Cinthio's tale, the quibbling about what kind of a non-white man Desdemona could fall in love with, and what kind of a "stranger" would the Venetian state not trust and employ (Pechter 203-205). It makes redundant even the defense of this love story by the likes of Bradley, and later Coleridge (Pechter 231; 241). It does so without abandoning the color motif. Ajay Devgan (the actor who plays Omkara) is black and Kareena Kapoor (who plays Dolly/Desdemona) has a near-white complexion. In the story world the color difference is, once again, placed in mythic context when Dolly, in terms of ceremonial praise, is likened to the white "flute" of the flute playing god of love, Krishna. What is not said at this time is that Krishna's beloved, Radha, is also white, while he is blue-black. In a popular song about his childhood, Krishna asks his mother, "tell me, mother, why is Radha white/Why am I black?" Thus, the white and black dichotomy is put in a very different context in *Omkara*, 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.

What is in the names in *Omkara* is not as pretty and heart-warming as the color symmetry-dissymmetry. Since socially and interpersonally destructive violence foregrounds anger, jealousy, rage, wrath, resentment, grudge of the perpetrator matched by the uncomprehending bewilderment, willing submission or fear of the victim, my contention is that these emotions are elicited by appraisals that are not merely biological, but take into account culture and socialization of emotion. One aspect of the socialization of emotion that the film uses is the reference to castes and, thus, the caste dharmas and their relation to violence. Tied to this are myths and metaphysics of creation, destruction and preservation of social forms and of mankind: the sacred role that violence plays in this cosmic drama. Quite often, the burden of the myths, epics, puranic stories, is to determine how much violence, under what conditions, all the whys, hows and wherefoths of it. This questioning in Hinduism, as in Christianity, is fraught with danger because the boundaries are slippery. The universal ethical principle dictates compliance under all circumstance to satya (truth) and ahimsa (non-violence). According to caste dharmas (codes of conduct and ethics) that adapt the basic ethics to survival in face of threat and danger, only the khatriyas (the warrior castes) engage in violence, not members of other castes, definitely not members of the scholar-priest class: the Brahmins.

Ironically, Bhardwaj's counterparts to Shakespeare's characters, Ishwar Tyagi (Iago), Omkara Shukla (Othello), Dolly Mishra (Desdemona) Keshav Upadhyaya (Cassio), and everyone else is given easily recognizable Brahmin surnames. The departure from tradition, where Brahmins did not bear arms but wore the sacred thread that primarily emphasized their commitment to the basic dharma of truth and non-violence is striking, because the main characters (well, not Dolly) take up arms and resort to violence to settle disputes, even minor disputes. The disjunction between a material culture of violence interspersed with sacred rites calibrated to tunes of Vedic mantras at various occasions creates a timeless world of Indian myth and social life that had always, in one way or another, carried within it these tensions, but that were, somehow, contained. The caste identities of the principal characters are emphasized in repeated shots of their sacred-threads, with special focus on the unclothed torso of Ishwar Langda Tyagi (Iago) as well as several front, back and side shots of Omkara's sacred thread.

When at the end Omkara makes an Othello like speech (a small part of it), he says to Tyagi: “there is no mukti (salvation) either for you, or me,” he does not only refer to their sin against Dolly, but their violation of universal principles of Hinduism that, in the post Gandhian era ought to have been the only valid principles to work by. Gandhi dismantled the warrior caste idea entirely; he redefined it as the nonviolent war of words and fasts: the satyagraha (insistence on truth and justice). He (as Patanjali had done before him in the *Yogasutras*) emphasized that the sadharana dharmas (basic, or universal ethical principles) of truth and non-violence are cardinal principles. His redefining of Hinduism for the modern age had been a significant historical and cultural moment in the life of the nation. What happened to change that? This question, to which there is no answer, haunts Bhardwaj’s *Omkaara*.

In order to activate laws of concern of individual Indians, but not overdo it, the reference to caste identities is not overused. Overemphasis would make it ineffective for elicitation of emotion, because after all India’s army today is composed of members of all castes –not just khatriyas. People’s professions today do not follow duties designated by caste, though the generic idea of caste is still associated with a certain type of work. Either way, in the film some diminishing of the focus on caste is necessary. Thus we note that Keshav Uppadhyay (Cassio), bearing a thorough Brahmin name, is nicknamed Kesu Firangi. His link to tradition and Brahminism is not emphasized. There is no shot of him wearing the sacred thread; he is often seen on his motor cycle, chauffeuring Dolly from place to place and running errands for Omkara and Ishwar. He speaks better English than Dolly; Ishwar and Omkara do not speak any English. They have grown up in the village and are career politicians. Kesu is from the city. The word, *Firangi*, has a long history in India’s relation to English culture and colonialism. Its basic meaning is a “foreigner,” but the term is also used to refer to Indians who have become foreignized, or modernized since modernity is primarily associated with foreign influence. As signifiers of identity labels, *desi* (of the desh, or country) and *firang* (foreigner) are used widely today when referring to dress, style, even food and dance, speech habits of Indians in India and abroad. Kesu’s teaching Dolly the Stevie Wonder song confirms his firang-ness in a playful manner, contrasting it with her desi-ness when she cannot pronounce a particular word the way he wants her to. Similarly, Omkara’s Brahmin-ness is compromised by his being a half caste; his father is Brahmin and mother low caste. After his abduction of Dolly, during a confrontation that threatens to become violent, the Brabantio like irate father-Mishra (a typical Brahmin last name) says: “I considered you a Brahmin and forgot that only one half (of you) is Brahmin; the other comes from that low caste kanjri (prostitute).” Besides earning him this caste-based condemnation from his father-in-law, the half caste identity diminishes Omkara’s authority with regard to Ishwar Tyagi (Iago). Tyagi’s last name designates him as the uppermost sub-caste among UP Brahmins. Thus, we see that parity with the white and black difference between Iago and Othello is established in terms of caste and sub-caste hierarchies, very different from the lyrical love of the black Krishna for his white flute and his beloved Radha: the girl whose color is of the moon and the champak flower.

Kesu, in this collage of identities, is not just a firangi, the college kid from the city. In devotional hymns composed in medieval India, the name, Keshava, refers to Vishnu in his incarnation (avatar) as Krishna. Vishnu, like Ea in the ancient Mesopotamian myth and legend, is a preserver god, friend to humans, who assumes the form of a gigantic fish to which the boat (that saves humanity from an apocalyptic flood) is anchored. In the epic war of *Mahabharata*, Krishna plays a different role. In the *Gita*, that is part of this epic and is later regarded as a sacred text, Krishna famously says: “I am time grown old/Come to destroy the world.” Even so, Vishnu

is mostly a preserver god in the Hindu trinity, while Rudra is the destroyer and Brahma the creator. While Kesu's name is directly related to a part of the Trinity and its avatar, other names are only associatively connected to the Hindu Trinity. For example, in Kashmir Shaivism Ishwar signifies 'the one who *creates* because he *desires*.' Thus, Ishwar is an attribute of Brahma, the creator god, while Omkara is the sacred letter, 'OM,' associated with knowledge, rituals and writing. (See Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 1 and 3, the Sacred Letter OM

Though Omkara's face in the film is sometimes shot from angles that establish a parallel with the letter, OM, in Devanagari script, Bhadrwaj depicts him as some form of Rudra, the destroyer god. The theme song, "OOOOMKAAARA," which is a war song, describes him as the greatest warrior (*sabse bade ladiaya re*). The words of the song and the associated montage make reference to both the iconography of Rudra from ancient India, and the 1857 Sepoy rebellion which sought to overthrow British administrative control of India.

At times of significant encounter with others, such as when he is summoned by Dolly's father to answer for the "crime" of having abducted his daughter, Omkara wears the all black chaddar (a cross between a blanket and a shawl) with a wide red border. Such chaddars in tribal areas are worn by robbers and dacoits, because they see themselves as overthrowing a system. Though Ishwar Tyagi (Langda) is Omkara's subordinate, in key scenes involving socio-political violence, he frequently appears in high angle shots, standing above others, with a gun in his hand. These contrast with shots where Langda' is quietly insinuating. These are frequently

medium shots with Langda and Omkara seated close to each other, like close friends in conference, their faces in profile, either half or quarter face to the camera, constituting nuances of doubt and faith as these two weave the fate of others (see Figure 4 and 5).



Figure 4 Omkara and Ishwar: doubt and confidence.

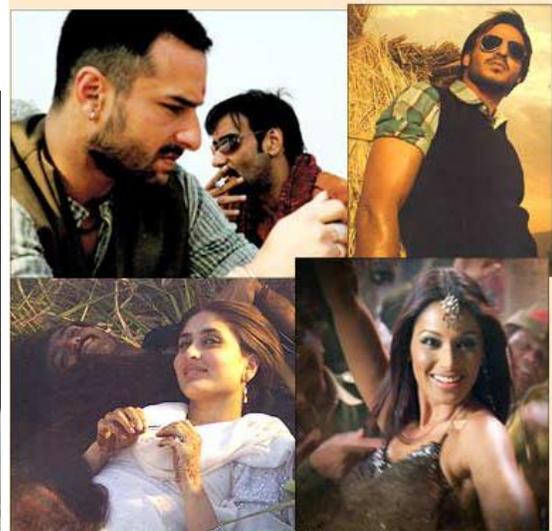


Figure 5: others in their story

In Orson Wells *Othello*, the two are in a room, walking circles around each other, like predator and unaware prey. Bhardwaj changes the dynamics to emphasize close friendship so that the perfidy of one does not come across as demented evil, but hurt pride, or just some random desire for destruction, and the trust of the other does not come across as excessive gullibility. When Omkara demands ocular proof, Langda is for a brief moment physically overpowered and beaten among the train tracks. The two have just killed an electoral ‘enemy,’ while he was travelling on the train that has just passed. In his demand for ocular proof, Omkara is insistent and brutal. However, when Ishwar Langda Tyagi stands up to face Omkara, he takes recourse to verbal equivocation concerning the truth and falsity of Dolly’s infidelity. At this time, their full body shots, soaked in later autumn rain, frame the cinematic image, suggesting something cold and bleak that is almost environmental. Omkara’s gaze is avoidant and Langda’s confirms the lie with a clear, unafraid look that prefigures the inevitability of Dolly’s fate.

At the beginning, when Ishwar Langda Tyagi orders Raju’s wedding party to reverse its course, or he will shoot, he is shot in the form of a silhouette, a three quarter face and body towards the camera: dark, menacing, but also playful since the occasion only demands that the wedding party go back. When he announces Kesu Firangi’s being appointed as the Bahu bali (the new leader/captain, literally strong armed enforcer), much to his own dissatisfaction that will fuel revenge, he is again seen standing on a rock, his back towards the camera, his sacred thread in the foreground, as he stands far above where the crowd, down below, as if in the valley, is celebrating this appointment with colors and song. When they kill the ‘captain’ of the rival party in a scuffle, it is Ishwar who shoots, standing once again, on a wall above the dueling Omkara and the Captain who had insinuated that Omkara will keep Dolly as his mistress and not marry her. From this perspective, Ishwar visually comes across as the mastermind and active agent of violence perpetrated under Omkara’s official direction, just as Iago’s plot of destruction, sprung of a desire that does not have an identifiable cause or motive, comes to have greater

agency. What is added to this motif in *Omkara* is the fact that Bhardwaj's Iago cannot be understood by others in the story world as the devil that ensnares minds of men. He is the creator god; the world is the play of his desire.

In naming the main characters loosely or tightly around the idea of Hindu Trinity, and filming them partially as such, Bhardwaj translates Biblical and other mythic referents in Shakespeare's play into an indigenous context. In terms of social morality, a similar concern about virtue and vice, sin and innocence, grace and loss of grace is activated. While Shakespeare's Iago refuses to speak at the end, Ishwar Tyagi is killed, in a Kali-like coup by his wife, Indu (Emilia). The charming, cheerful village wife, in her benevolent avatar of Indu, has metamorphosed through anger, grief and guilt (for she stole the love gift) into Kali: the goddess who destroys evil. This sequence of shots is carefully modeled on the Kali iconography found in art, story and legend. Being associated with the creator god, by resonance of his name and through angles of framing, Bhardwaj merges creation and destruction in the figure of Langda Tyagi, but limits it through the agency given to Indu-Emilia. As for the limp, he may have taken a hint from *Richard III*; yet, the humor in the creator-god's filmic substitute having a limp works well in the film. What remains, then, is the idea of the sacred encapsulated in the letter, OM, and that quality is associated with Omkara. The Langda nickname, by which Ishwar Tyagi is consistently called, establishes a reverse parallel with Othello, who is consistently referred to as the Moor, not Othello. Omkara's name suggests a circle of sacred time and a pattern that, in the context of linear history and its teleological patterns deriving from modernity (which is essentially not-Indian), cannot be completed; a new creation will not follow this dissolution. Indu is not Kali, but a village wife who has just killed her husband. The last shot depicts her howling like an animal in pain over the well she will drown in. The proverbial drowning of "blind puppies" in *Othello* is translated into real drowning twice in the film. The viewer knows Indu will leave her son, Golu, an abject orphan. At this time, Golu's pet name, suggesting roundness, a child's sweet chubbiness (such as belongs to baby Krishna in pictures and posters), has other connotations. Golu's life will deflate him beyond recognition. The events will not come full circle. The allegorical figure for the preserver god, Keshava, or Vishnu, is ultimately the de-glamorised Kesu. Billo frequently (though affectionately) addresses him as "haramkhor" (shameless parasite); he is, though kind and sane, an ineffectual, smooth talking womanizer, a misguided college kid, too dissipated to save others, though he is himself saved.

Through abundant spectacle of local culture, the documentary focus of the film is on a community in the remote, rural areas of Uttar Pradesh/Bihar/Madhya Pradesh that evokes an antiquated, but still practiced heroic age ethos of strong armed violence juxtaposed with modernity and its many gadgets, such as cell phones, trains, cars, most prominently guns and soldiers. While in Shakespeare's play, Iago's villainy is thought to be motiveless, with the stated 'reason' (that Othello made Cassio his captain) only intended to gull Roderigo, Vishal Bhardwaj's Ishwar Tyagi's malevolence is motivated. He feels deeply wronged because Omkara chooses a less heroic figure, a mere college student, Kesu (Keshav Uppadhyay), as his bahu-bali, the party leader in his place because Omkara has been promoted in the party hierarchy to a place in the local assembly. As one would expect, Langda Tyagi carries out his revenge by making Omkara believe that Dolly has an affair with Kesu, because they studied at the same college and have much in common, while Omkara and Dolly come from very different worlds and have nothing in common. While the law of concern guides what the film shows and how it links character and plot elements symptomatically to concerns about domestic violence, requirements of chastity and virginity, as well as larger social concerns about electoral violence that steals and

sabotages free and fair elections, the flow of story time and action is predicated on the emotion law of closure. It is not a circular closure, but a linear one.

What You See can Hurt You: Ocular Proof and the Law of Closure

The law of closure refers to the self contained nature of an emotion, emotional reaction or an emotion episode, its absoluteness characterized by Frijda in the following words "...emotions know no probabilities, no likelihoods. What they know they know. Your jealousy is certain.Your anger is certain" (16). The law of closure shows itself in what people do, by the urge to act, and by the absoluteness and finality of the act itself. After he has decided that "she must die, else she'll betray more men," Othello reflects: "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul!/Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars/It is the cause." (5.2.1-3). The utterance exemplifies what is meant by the absoluteness of the law of closure that makes subjects "...closed to the requirements of interests other than those of their own aims" (Frijda 15). This absoluteness, the emotion script of all or nothing, is evident not only in Othello's resolve, but his philosophical and moral aggrandizement of it. If speech patterns, proverbs, and other cultural discourses (which function as appraisal models) imply that love is possession, and wife is a space that has been invaded and contaminated, it must be repossessed first through murder when the wife is thought to have challenged that idea and, later, through suicide when it is proven that she had not challenged that idea. In so far as anthropomorphically, democracy can be seen as "wife" of the Political Man, as the country is his "mother," every electoral rival is a thief, a robber who violates sanctity of marriage, and is not a legitimate contestant in a fair fight for vote, voice and place (of power in the polity). When the error of this perception, which is only partially conscious, is at least partially realized, suicide maintains a code of conduct expected of the warrior. The absoluteness of love and anger marks the end in the play and the film. Othello's final words, inadvertently, link him to the turban'd turk, identifying him as the enemy of the state, though his literal request to those who witness his death is that his services to the Venetian state should be remembered. Omkara also identifies himself as the enemy of the state, an ingrown, deeply grafted enemy whom the state has created and whom the home has created through socialization of emotion that cannot escape the errors of gender, caste and other divisive ideologies, and appraisal models derived from them. In political terms the bride in red who lies dead on the sadly swaying swing is, thus, something larger, like a Polity, more specifically a Gandhian polity, that ought to have been saved. Beneath it, revealed and concealed by turns, is the white robed body of the bridegroom, who had always worn khaki, and/or red and black. His corpse is now a metonymic sign of the white-robed politician, the region's electoral candidate for the parliament in Delhi (whom everyone calls Bhaisaheb, big brother, and who is played by Naseerudin Shah)-- the one who is the celebrated public servant as well as the theme of, and the reason for electoral crimes.

The handkerchief, an object that Rymer thought to be too flimsy a cause for rage and jealousy, and whose strawberry design is put in perspective by Linda Boose--with the hermeneutic notion that the design on the handkerchief is a code for public display of blood on the wedding sheets to prove a bride's virginity (Pechter 262)-- is changed by Bhardwaj to a very large, ornate, waist ornament, called a kardhani. It is an ornament associated with eroticism and sexual desire in marriage (see Figure 6) and it also signifies the new roles of the bride as the daughter-in-law and future mistress of the home (sometimes a bunch of keys is tied to a more functional, less ornate, kardhani).



Figure 6 --Dolly wearing the family heirloom, the kardhani: object of Omkara's gaze

Both the flimsy object in the original play and the heavy piece of jewelry (a family heirloom) in the film are emotion objects that visualize the abstract law of absoluteness (of emotion), its irreversible journey towards catastrophic closure. Thus, through visual insistence that is almost uncanny, the object (as a stage prop and as part of emotively motivated *mise en scene*) is lost and stolen in the *complication* and *rising action* phases of stage and screen action; it appears on stage (and screen) as a proof of the wife's infidelity in the *climax* (see Figure 7) and *falling action* phases of plot transformations, thickening the veil of *agnouia* (ignorance).



Figure 7: Billoo wearing the stolen kardhani, that has changed hands from Indu (who stole it) to Ishwar Langda Tyagi, to Kesu, given to Billoo by Kesu. Billoo is singing the 'Namak' song to her 'banke sipahiye,' the playfully Dionysian, but uniformed, soldiers

It leads to belated *anagnorisis* (*recognition*) at the end when it is brought back into visual focus as undeniable proof of the wife's supposed guilt: the evidence that firms up the murderous resolve, and immediately after as evidence that exonerates the just murdered wife. At this moment in the film Indu says very quietly: "it was I who stole this," holding the ornament in her hand, as Omkara, his face turned away from her, realizing his error, turns towards Indu and the now dead Dolly. The lost object is found and verified so that the absoluteness of love can have ontological certainty and lead to the ritual act of suicide.

In the film, the movement towards closure is accentuated by non-diegetic strains of a song lyric, a devotional hymn: “eyes will cheat you;/ do not listen to them; do not see with them”(naina thag lenge, nainaa thag lenge/nainon kee mat maniyo, nainon kee mat suniyo re). All devotional hymns of this sort (this song lyric was written for *Omkara*) invoke historical context of the Bhakhti period, when vernacular literatures and languages of India fashioned themselves. This song accompanies various sequences of emotive montage, for instance, the story of Dolly and Omkara’s romance. When he comes to her doorstep at night, wounded, his feet staggering, she holds him and takes him inside, blood from his wound colors the sky blue muslin cloth on her shoulder. This is Dolly’s recurrent memory of their blossoming and deepening love, clearly an emotion memory. Its significance is always ambiguous and enigmatic. The song uses the imperative case; it is as if an addressee is somewhere in the story world, but no one there can hear it; only the viewer can. It offers a poetic commentary and perhaps picks up on the conventional appearance and reality motif in Shakespeare. With reference to Dolly’s emotion memory, Omkara’s wound could not have been received in anything but some ethically unwholesome encounter. He is no martyr for a noble cause. Should that matter to her? Isn’t the blood of the beloved’s body always sacred? Can we say history and politics are less real than subjective feeling?

When Dolly’s father dredges up Omkara’s caste history Omkara makes a distinction between subjective feeling and external forms of decorum: “Vakil Saheb (Mr. Lawyer), you have kept good khabar (account) of my caste; yet, you have no khabar (news) of what passes in your daughter’s heart.” In Bhojpuri Hindi this sentence is very expressive and is spoken as one would deliver lines of a verse. Omkara is, at this moment, speaking the satyagraha (insistence on truth) language of Mahatma Gandhi, not the language of guns and fights, just as Othello at this moment asks the soldiers to “put up” their swords or the dew will rust them. The reference to subjective feeling in relation to the silent language of eyes comes up again when Omkara demands ocular proof (of Dolly’s infidelity). He says to Langda: “Whatever you dream up, it is just you and no one else; when you listen to other’s dreams it is just you and the dreamer (Kesu), no one else. When I look in Dolly’s eyes, your whole Ramayana sounds false to me.” The accusation of falsehood, as compared with the ‘truth’ of Dolly’s eyes, equates Ishwar Tyagi (Iago) to the citizens of Rama’s city who did not believe that Sita, the queen, was chaste. The Ramayana reference associates Dolly with Sita: an exemplar of virtue besieged, while the insistence on ocular proof further evidences the narrative working out of the law of closure. The doubter wants certainty of knowledge to that he can act (kill this Sita), while the “naina” song is cautionary, it instructs one to doubt all that one sees in the material world because it is the world of maya, and is, thus, rife with *agnouia*. The only *anagnorisis*, recognition, one can attain is the recognition of one’s error. For that one has to err so that the darkness of maya becomes so dense that it, literally and metaphorically, tears out one’s heart, that it tears out the darkening traps of history and body to allow one to look beyond. A counterpoint to the balladry of the opening war song that celebrates *Omkara*’ rise to fame and social power is presented by the hymnal tonality of the “naina”song. At the end, the musical intensity of the refrain, “nainon kee mat maniyo/ nainon kee mat suniyo re,” is a requiem for Omkara and Dolly, their free choice of each other, as it is a requiem for the kind of postcolonial Indian polity Gandhi had envisioned. In a global context, Bhardwaj’s film can be understood (and enjoyed) as a requiem for world peace, sung in a foreign (firang) tongue at the turn of the 21st century.

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