

# Transcending Cultural Boundaries: A Study of the Adaptation of Shakespeare's Othello by Vishal Bharadwaj

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## ■ ABSTRACT ■

Ever since they were first produced, more than four hundred years ago, Shakespeare's plays have been reproduced and adapted into countless film and TV productions, into ballets and operas and theatre performances across the globe.

The present paper, within a broad conceptual framework, aims to investigate the cross cultural dimension of adaptation of a stage play, written for the Renaissance England, into a 21<sup>st</sup> century Indian feature film.

The paper uses Omkara, an adaptation of Othello by Vishal Bharadwaj, as a case study to:

- (i.) Explore the use of the idiomatic language of cinema in such an adaptation.
- (ii.) Posit a re-reading of Shakespeare with the help of local/native signifiers.

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## Key Words

Cross cultural adaptations, cultural barriers, text reading, theatre, film

With his plays bubbling up in film and TV adaptations, in operas and ballets and in regular theatre performances even today, four hundred years after they were originally written, Shakespeare remains the most popular screen writer ever. About four hundred feature length films and TV adaptations of his plays have already been produced and Shakespeare continues to fascinate and tantalize the creativity of the visual arts fraternity even today.

### Objectives

The present paper, within a broad conceptual framework, aims to investigate the cross cultural dimension of adaptation of a stage play, written for the Renaissance England, into a 21<sup>st</sup> century Indian feature film.

The paper uses *Om kara*, an adaptation of *Othello* by Vishal Bharadwaj, as a case study to:

- i. Explore the use of the idiomatic language of cinema in such an adaptation.
- ii. Posit a re-reading of Shakespeare with the help of local/native signifiers.

### Constraints of the Elizabethan Theatre

*Othello* was written for the Elizabethan theater which comprised a polygon stage with three layered galleries on all sides except directly behind it. Right in the front would be a large yard for the audience who could not afford a seat. There would be an upper level behind the stage that could be used as a balcony or to seat the musicians. There would be no background scenery and the usual props were bits of furniture, weapons and small set pieces. As for the audience themselves,

Shakespeare's audience was far more boisterous than are the patrons of the theatre today. They were loud and hot tempered and as interested in happenings off stage as on. One of Shakespeare's contemporaries

noted that, you will see much of heaving and shoving, such itching and shouldering to sit by the women, such care for their garments that they be not trod upon ... such trying, such smiling, such winking, such manning them home... that it is a right comedy to mark their behavior.(Mabillard)

This then was the milieu for which *Othello* was written. In the almost complete absence of scenery, sets and props, the same were compensated by language. “We know that we are in the Forest of Arden for example or on the battlements of a Danish Castle, or on the sea coast of Bohemia because the characters tell us so, not because we can see or hear for ourselves that we are”. (Fischlin) Hence also perhaps the use of the word ‘audience’ and not spectators for theater goers.

#### The Source of the Story

That Shakespeare was a playwright nonpareil is never the question. At the same time, Shakespeare never did contribute any original story to the body of literature. Instead he made extensive use of stories of other authors and adapted them into new plays. *Othello* is believed to be based on an Italian story in a collection written by Giraldi Cinthio. The plot of *Othello* is simple enough. A man of arms and military glory but non Christian, takes for himself an exotic bride. She is beautiful, a Christian and of a noble family. The fairy tale romance ends in tragedy due to the innuendoes and suggestions of a subordinate and confidante who corrupts the hero’s mind against his wife. Believing her guilty of infidelity, he kills her. The tragedy is compounded when the husband realizes his grave error and so kills himself as well.

#### Reading between and beyond the lines: The Interpretations

“But Shakespeare’s originality was as much a function of his skills at adapting pre- existing sources as it was about his vast knowledge of

how to convey narrative effectively across a range of theatrical genres”. (Canadian Shakespeare) And so the story of the Venetian Moor from 110 Stories assumes sublime proportions in the hands of this master craftsman. “*Othello* is the most painfully exciting and the most terrible. From the moment when the temptation of the hero begins, the reader’s heart and mind are held in a vice, experiencing the extremes of pity and fear, sympathy and repulsion, sickening hope and dreadful expectation”. (Bradley)

Wherein lies the genius that an ordinary story of love, betrayal and murder becomes a classic? Thomas De Quincey in his essay *On the knocking at the Gate in Macbeth* justifiably argues that in the case of murder the sympathy is wholly with the victim. The instinct for self preservation is common to all living creatures and ‘exhibits human nature in its most abject and humiliating attitude’. As such it would not arouse any dramatic interest. The skill and genius of a story teller would lie in throwing the interest upon the murderer. “But in the murderer, such murderer as a poet will condescend to, there must be raging some great ambition, vengeance hatred which will create hell within him; and into this hell we are to look.”(William 167)

Myriad critics have found myriad interpretations of *Othello*. *Othello* is believed to be a tragedy of the hero at the hands of a foreign culture. Some critics call it a tragedy of misunderstandings. Coleridge calls Othello the man to be a victim of motiveless malignity of Iago. Iago of course remains the focus of all attention, causing Othello’s downfall through the machinations of his many layered villainy. Was the villainy really motiveless? He confesses to his love for Desdemona, “Now I do love her too.” (Act I: Sc I: 290) He is jealous and hurt that he has been superseded for promotion. “It is the curse of service preferment goes by letter and affection and not by old gradation.”(Act I:Sc I: 35) He is jealous of the love shared by Othello and Desdemona, “ His soul is so enfeathered to her love that she may make, unmake to what she list even as her

appetite shall play the God.” (Act II: Sc III: 310) and then he confesses that he suspects Othello to be involved with his wife Emilia. “And it is thought abroad that betwixt my sheets he has done my office.” (Act I: Sc III: 375) and there is his sense of glory in his ability to control and corrupt the minds of men. “Make the Moor thank me, love me and reward me, for making his egregiously as ass and practicing upon his peace and quiet even to madness.” (Act III: Sc I: 300)

### Film Adaptations: Film Vs Theatre

This then is the rich resource to draw material from, for film making. But transmuting a text into a visual medium requires certain inevitable omissions, inclusions, alterations and subjective interpretations.

The film as a genre is a definitive and solitary interpretation of a text. It is a director's , and, upto an extent, the actor's interpretation of a story. The creative genius arrives at a single interpretation of a character/ story/ event which is then filmed- irrevocably. Theatre on the other hand has the advantage that a player can, performance upon performance, portray different interpretations, play upon the nuances and shades of meaning of the text and even respond to the reaction of the audience. For example an entry in Pepy's diary records that at one performance of *Othello* in 1660, one woman in the audience demanded to see Desdemona smothered to death on stage. A case in point is the character of Othello. “He stands for the turbulence (psychological and dramatic) that has destroyed him. He is a Christian defender of Venice and her barbarian enemy, ruler and outsider, true lover and love's murderer, faithless believer, unconventional convention and metaphor unmetaphored”. (Pilginton)

No single production can of course portray all this. For a story to be coherent, it has to choose a point of view. In his essay on *Othello's Stature: Three filmed Versions of the Moor*, Ace G Pilkington has compared the performance and production of Burger- Oliver (National Theatre), Jonathan Miller (BBC) and Bard filming. As a point in case, he has

compared and contrasted the first appearance of Othello on stage in the three productions. Anthony Hopkin's makes his first appearance fussing with his ensign's gorget. This Othello does not look black, not even tawny and is almost fair. Hence the references to his 'blackness' skitter off into the air, signifiers in search of signified. Oliver's Othello makes his first appearance toying with a rose in hand. This Othello seems what Iago and Brabantio claim him to be – a lascivious Moor. In the third production, Marshall's Othello appears on stage wanting to share his happiness with the audience and he seems to be the soldier and the lover – a man whose violent life has been transfigured into a beautiful courtship. The audience, like the Duke would willingly believe that such a man would 'win his daughter too'.

### The Cultural Barriers

In adapting a play written for the Renaissance England for a 21<sup>st</sup> century Indian feature film, Vishal Bharadwaj needed to transcend cultural boundaries- both in terms of geography as well as time.

A film audience does not have negative capability. It has its pre conceived notions and predispositions which are coloured by the ethos and sensibility of its culture. Since culture is a shared pattern of meanings, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not only arbitrary but also differs from culture to culture.

Some of the questions interwoven in the text of *Othello* are that of Othello's race, which in post colonial era, would also include the question of White man's superiority, the cultural isolation of Desdemona in the newly conquered outpost at Cyprus, the submissive and naïve character of woman – Desdemona, etc. Bharadwaj had to choose his own lens. He read and interpreted Shakespeare based on his own perceptions and cultural traditions. Bharadwaj also had to ensure that he was communicating with his audience who shared his cultural ethos but also had been bred on the language of Hindi cinema.

### Reconciling the Text to the Context: Cultural Adaptations

Bharadwaj's is a story of sexual jealousy and revenge. Omkara/Othello, played by Ajay Devgan is a hero towering over fellow men- dark, brooding half caste (Shakespeare's Othello is a foreigner- a Moor). This man weds a city bred girl- beautiful, accomplished, educated. The dramatic conflict here is between the romantic- idealistic love of Othello and Desdemona and the unmitigated evil of Iago. Iago cannot and would not conceive a romantic ideal and hence has to corrupt and demolish it. Othello and Desdemona on the other hand cannot conceive of any such depravity and hence are duped and betrayed by it. Ofcourse the reading of the text enables one to come up with many other motives but Bharadwaj chooses to focus on Iago's ambition and jealousy. His Iago/Langda Tyagi, played by Saif Ali Khan, is intensely competitive. The film opens with him throwing a challenge at Roderigo / Rajju to catch Desdemona/ Dolly before she elopes with Omkara. In the next scene, the idea is reinforced when Langda Tyagi is over aggressive in a game of marbles he is playing with Cassio/ Firangi Kishu (Vivek Oberoi). Such a man could not and would not ignore a slight when he is superseded for the position of 'Bahubali' a war lord of 21<sup>st</sup> century Indian political scene. Once Langda Tyagi, on his camera captures, actually and metaphorically, Dolly and Kishu close together, the die is cast. The milieu and the moment were in harmony for the destruction of the man Othello. Iago/ Tyagi embarks upon a ceaseless campaign of lies and deceit , of theft and subterfuge, of insinuations and innuendoes till Omkara though not jealous by nature is enraged with jealousy and out of fear of being cuckolded and dishonoured kills his bride. In the text Othello pleads to himself that he is killing Desdemona to save her from herself, "She must die else she will betray more men." (Act V: Sc II: 10) Omkara kills Dolly to save himself from disgrace.

To further reinforce this theme of sexual jealousy Bharadwaj replaces the handkerchief of the original story used by Iago to prove Desdemona's infidelity by a more explicit sex object- a waist band. A waist band

also has several connotative, evocative and denotative meanings for the Indian audience. A gold waistband is quite the most expensive bit of jewellery and is a family heirloom. It signifies the role of the bride as the mistress of the household- sometimes a bunch of keys may be attached to it signifying household control. If a gift from a husband, it represents eroticism and sexual desire. Othello/ Omkara's angst would be appreciated by the Indian audience when Dolly /Desdemona loses this precious article or as Omkara/ Othello believes, has given it away to another man.

The almost bawdy exchange between Iago, Emilia and Desdemona gives way to two sexually provocative songs Beedi Jaliyle and Namak Ishq ka. Shakespeare was catering to the tastes of the groundlings in the pit. Bharadwaj has done the same. Infact a song –dance sequence is a trademark of Hindi feature films and the audience expects it. A sizzling hot Billo Chaman Bahar (Bipasha Basu) is Bharadwaj's answer to Shakespeare's Bianca. Without Billo's raunchy numbers, Bharadwaj would perhaps have lost the entire crowd of groundlings and much of others as well.

The wedding of Othello and Desdemona is an accomplished fact in Shakespeare. It is referred to, not portrayed. Weddings to the western world are, after all, a private affair between two individuals who may or may not choose to share the moment with others. Definitely not so in India. A wedding is a social affair with all the vibrant colour and swing of life- elaborate rituals, lavish feasting, ostentatious display of power and pelf. Omkara begins and ends with scenes of weddings. The first frame shows Rajju/ Roderigo the bridegroom with his wedding party on his way to marry Dolly/Desdemona. The last frame is that of the bride in all her wedding finery lying dead on the swing- another object with overt and covert sexual connotations- and beneath, on the floor, lies the bridegroom, where he too has fallen dead.

Aristotle laid down that for Catharsis to occur, the tragic hero must tower over ordinary men and yet should suffer from hamartia – the one

tragic flaw- that would bring about his downfall and death. By and large Shakespeare paid scant regard to Aristotelian principles. Yet his tragic heroes do have hamartia- Hamlet has the inability to act spontaneously, Macbeth is ambitious, Lear vain, Antony unsteady. Othello alone seems completely devoid of any flaw-a noble mind, a valiant and loyal soldier, a much liked and respected citizen, an adored husband. In the text his greatness is built up through conversations of others and his own poised and commanding presence. Bharadwaj in the tradition of Hindi movies incorporated a song – a panegyric on Omkara- he is the greatest warrior, a leader of men .... . The tragedy in *Omkara* and one of the tragedies in *Othello* is not that (Othello/Omkara) loved her (Desdemona/Dolly) less but that he loved her too well. “For there is no love not that of Romeo in his youth more steeped in imagination than Othello’s”. (Bradley)

*The Imperial Theme* discusses how, “The positive life themes of brightness and joy give a new dimension and add life to the negative themes and images”. (Knight) Othello, together with Desdemona is the theme of brightness and joy. Bharadwaj adds little touches to enhance this positive theme and give Omkara tragic proportions: helping an old women draw water, the indulgent elder brother to Iago’s wife, the patient, affectionate uncle to Iago’s son, the dutiful deputy of Bhaisaheb/ Nasiruddin Shah, and of course the supreme commander of men whose very presence brings order into an assembly of rioting men.

### Cinematography

The scene of action in *Othello* is Cyprus.

In transporting Othello and Desdemona to Cyprus, Shakespeare casts additional light on their relationship and enriches our understanding of the moral and psychological patterns of the play- Desdemona’s removal from her familiar environment isolates her during her ordeal. Finally in what Alvin Kernan describes as the ‘symbolic geography of the play’ Cyprus stands as an insecure Christian outpost on the

frontier of barbarianism. It is an uneasy middle ground between civilization represented by the city Venice and Desdemona and ancient chaos identified with Turks, Iago and the savage origins of Othello himself. In the psyche of Othello a barbarian and convert to Christianity these polar forces are maintained in precarious balance.(Zesmer)

Bharadwaj moves his entourage to rural Uttar Pradesh. Infact the first shot is that of a barren stretch of land. Peter Brooke claims that a Shakespeare play has no setting. But when Vishal Bharadwaj chose to shoot his film at the back of the beyond in the Hindi heartland, he gave his film an added dimension. The emotions that run in the film are an echo and reflection of the terrain- raw, rugged, rustic. The small hamlet is barren, isolated, justice is quick and arbitrary, male dominance unquestioned. References to sex are shorn of all sophistication and the language heavily loaded with sexual abuses and innuendoes.

There still remains the larger question of the imagery in Shakespeare and its adaptation on screen. "Films should transmute Shakespeare's poetic dramatic atmosphere into visual terms – not merely reproducing the action with appropriate sections of dialogue, but carefully replacing Shakespeare's poetic imagery with imagery re conceived visually".(Manvell)

Thus the pivotal point of the play- Cassio's succession- translated here as anointment of Kishu- is a work of genius. Iago says,

And what was he? (the successor)Forsooth a great arithmetician, one Michael Cassio, a Florentine, a fellow almost damned in a fair wife; that never set a squadron in the field not the division of a battle knows more than a spinster, unless the bookish theoretic wherein the togged consuls can propose as masterly as he: mere prattle without practice is all his soldiership. But he Sir had the election. And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof at Rhodes at Cyprus and on other grounds Christian and heathen must his lieutenant be, and I, God bless the Moor, His Moorship's ancient. (Act I: Sc I: 35)

There are no such monologues in *Omkara*. Keshu Firangi is anointed in an elaborate ritual in the village temple- Langda Tyagi drives his fist into a mirror and splatters himself with his own blood in a gory ceremony of self anointment. In another moving passage, Barbritos says “oh who would be a father” and proceeds to counsel Othello that she (Desdemona) has deceived her father and may deceive him as well. The dialogue is just as powerful in *Omkara*, only here his car is wedged between Desdemona and Othello. His parting shot remains the ember that stokes the fire of jealousy in *Omkara*. “Shakespeare’s plays are positioned towards dialogic mode, although they retain a high potential for visual elements”. (Manvell) There are other flash images that linger long after the film is over- *Omkara*’s first appearance on screen- a tall brooding man, pausing at the head of a staircase, surveying the lesser mortals assembled below, or that of Emilia running with sickle in hand and child in tow, the simple housewife who is the last frame kills her own husband for the wrongs he has done. “The cinema has seen stage directions in Shakespeare’s poetry where decades of theatrical craftsmen have seen only words (Listener, The).

In terms of time frame, Bharadwaj has successfully transplanted a four hundred year old story to contemporary India. A college educated heroine, universal use of cell phones, drives in SUVs, indeed all the typical snap shots of 21<sup>st</sup> century India have been seamlessly integrated into the 16<sup>th</sup> century story. Soliloquies, asides, eaves dropping – peculiar developments of stage, have been ingeniously replaced by these contraptions .Scenes of eaves dropping for example, wherein Iago supplies proof of Desdemona’s infidelity is shot with cell phone on speaker mode, and Othello hears confessions of Rodriego’s revelries presumably with Desdemona. Likewise in Shakespeare, the relationship between Desdemona and Roderigo is pure conjecture. In *Omkara*, Dolly zooms around on a mobike, piggy riding with Roderigo. Given the rural Indian context, this would have raised eyebrows in the society even without Tyagi subtly hinting at an affair between the two.

Readers of texts find themselves mostly disappointed when they see the book or play reproduced on stage. Theatre performers and theatre goers are, as often as not, condescending towards films. What a story loses when it is told through a visual medium is that it restricts the imagination of the reader. Concepts of beauty, honour, chivalry, etc are all culture specific- culture bound. It is the creativity of a theatre or film producer that s/he gives the text a local habitation and name which is found significant and meaningful by the audience. The success of *Omkara*, both as a creative entity and a commercial enterprise, lies in Bharadwaj's ingenious use of local signifiers and a very creative use of the language of cinema in adapting *Othello* to a film. *Omkara* is completely Shakespearian, completely Indian. In recreating *Othello*, Bharadwaj has not lost the soul of either.

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