

# Indianised Shakespeare: A Study of Vishal Bhardwaj's Use of Shakespeare's Plays in His Portrayal of the Indian Social Milieu

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## Abstract:

Eminent Indian filmmaker, Vishal Bhardwaj, has garnered worldwide critical acclaim for his Shakespearean trilogy. He has masterfully adapted Shakespeare's Macbeth, Othello and Hamlet to the locus of the Bollywood film, creating Maqbool, Omkara and Haider, respectively. While there have been works by scholars which have looked at Bhardwaj's films for their adaptational qualities, there have been none that extensively focus on how his films foreground the conflicts present in Indian society. Bhardwaj's films prove how the inherent universality and complexity of Shakespeare's plays are a perfect site for the inner conflicts and complexities present in Indian society. Issues like the politics of gender and ethnic performativity and casteism in the Indian milieu are imbibed within the narratives of Bhardwaj's films. This paper will attempt to see Bhardwaj's Shakespearean trilogy through the scope of film theory and cultural studies to study how his films use the context of Shakespeare's plays to highlight these problematic facets of Indian society.

**Keywords:** Gender performativity, politics of ethnicity, Shakespeare adaptations, caste, Caste.

"Shakespeare", said English writer Walter Savage Landor, "is not our poet, but the world's." It is no secret that the dramaturgical focus on human nature present in Shakespeare's plays, along with of course their brilliance, have led to an almost universal and timeless approval of their cinematic potential. Shakespeare has served, and continues to serve as an inspiration for thousands of successful films all over the world. India has produced numerous such films as well.

Whether it be Gulzar's classic comedy, *Angoor*, based on *The Comedy of Errors*, the commercial potboiler retelling of *Romeo and Juliet* in Bhansali's *Goliyon ki Rasleela*, or the countless 'unofficial' remakes

that continue to spring up, Indian cinema has spawned several successful films inspired by Shakespeare over the years. Nonetheless, there has arguably been no other Indian filmmaker that has been able to translate Shakespeare to the Indian milieu as skilfully and as successfully as Vishal Bhardwaj.

Vishal Bhardwaj has garnered worldwide critical acclaim for his Shakespearean trilogy. He has adapted Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Hamlet* to the locus of the Bollywood film, creating *Maqbool*, *Omkaara* and *Haider*, respectively. Speaking at Thirteenth Habitat Film Festival, in a session titled 'World to Screen: Translating Shakespeare and Ruskin Bond,' Bhardwaj said that his initial "ignorance" towards Shakespeare's literature was "bliss" for him: "I had this instinctive connection with his literature, which probably nobody else had. I just wanted to see the conflicts he had in our own culture and society" (qtd. in "Vishal Bhardwaj").

While there have been works by scholars which have looked at Bhardwaj's films for their adaptational qualities, there has been a dearth of works which extensively focus on how his films foreground the conflicts present in Indian society. Bhardwaj's films prove how the inherent universality and complexity of Shakespeare's plays are a perfect site for the inner conflicts and complexities present in Indian society. Issues like the politics of gender and ethnic performativity and casteism in the Indian milieu are imbibed within the narratives of Bhardwaj's films. This paper will attempt to see Bhardwaj's Shakespearean trilogy through the scope of film theory, in relation to critical theory, to study how his films use the context of Shakespeare's plays to highlight these problematic facets of Indian society.

In *Maqbool*, Vishal Bhardwaj's first and arguably best foray into Shakespeare, Bhardwaj almost as ambitiously as his protagonist, replaces the royal Scottish setting of *Macbeth* with the gangland of Mumbai's underbelly. This new setting acts as an apt conduit for Shakespeare's themes of greed and political ambition. Vishal Bhardwaj's indianisation of the character of Lady Macbeth in his film is what holds the most interest for this paper.

Lady Macbeth is represented in the film by Tabu's Nimmi. Bhardwaj makes a creative interpolation to the text by presenting her as King Duncan's (Jahangir in the film) young wife who is in love with his right hand man, Maqbool (Macbeth). As an effect of the society she lives in and the unequal gender roles it accords, she, unlike Jahangir, is not respected and is equated with being one of his mistresses. Such a leading female character in Bollywood, if there were any, would most likely be presented as a passive victim of the

voyeuristic male gaze of both the men on screen and the spectators off it. This is where Vishal Bhardwaj differs or even dissents.

Like Lady Macbeth, and unlike most portrayals of the female gender in Indian cinema, Nimmi is not merely some meek object of desire for men. Rather she is the wheel around which the actions of her husband, and the film itself, revolve. She is seductive, provocative and powerful. She actively yearns for change and power. This does not mean that Bhardwaj completely removes her from the constructed burden, or the "masquerade," as Mary Ann Doane labels it (25), that a woman, especially an Indian woman has to bear.

Nimmi is treated by the powerful Jahangir merely as an object for his pleasure. Even as he brings in another mistress, she still has to put on the face of a happy wife and hide her love for Maqbool. This ultimately consolidates her desire to get rid of Jahangir and be with Maqbool. Even before her plan succeeds, she is disrespected and labeled a prostitute throughout the film. She is deemed an unfit mother even before she actually becomes one. All of this further adds to her guilt which leads to her tragic demise.

*Omkaara*, Vishal Bhardwaj's retelling of *Othello*, is aided by some clever casting choices. The moorish Othello is played by the rugged, dark-skinned Ajay Devgn while the beautiful, fair-skinned Kareena Kapoor plays Desdemona. The story is transported to the criminal and political landscape of Meerut, Uttar Pradesh. Unfortunately, Indian society, with its problems of casteism, racial discrimination, gender performativity and political profiteering, serves as a perfect base for the central concerns of racial insecurity, jealousy and betrayal. It comes as no surprise that the film proved to be both a critical and commercial success.

The complex character of Othello is skillfully Indianised into *Omkaara* in the film. *Omkaara* is portrayed as an illegitimate child. He is only half Brahmin and is dark skinned. He is even lacking in his education and yet he manages to rise to a high position due to his bravery and courage. Thus, as per Andrew Dix's theory on film and ideology, Vishal Bhardwaj's character along with the star power of Ajay Devgn, instead of merely reproducing cultural norms, offer socially dissenting forms of racial, ethnic and class identity. It might provide the opportunity for a positive identification, and perhaps even inspiration to spectators from various minorities (Dix 232).

And yet, due to the politics of ethnicity, race, class and gender performativity that are deeply entrenched within Indian society, *Omkaara*'s complex racial and ethnic make up leads to him being looked down upon not just by other characters but even by himself. Being of a higher caste and a fairer skin is equated with a higher worth in Indian society. Thus, it is even easier for the envious higher-caste Langda, than it is for

Iago in the play, to plant the seed of jealousy in Omkara's mind which leads to his tragic downfall. Langda's scheming combined with Omkara's own self-doubt lead him to believe that his loyal friend and his wife-to-be, both of whom are fair-skinned, educated and of a higher caste, are having an affair.

For once falling to the dictates of Bollywood, Bharwaj objectifies the character of Bianca, played in the film by Bipasha Basu whose primary role in the film is to serve the voyeuristic desires of men, both on and off the screen. Nonetheless, as in *Maqbool*, Vishal Bhardwaj presents another leading female character in *Omkara* that attempts to go against the passiveness that her gender construct accords her. Dolly, representing Desdemona from the play, is a modern, educated young girl who even stands up to her father in order to marry the lower-caste Omkara.

*Omkara* also shows how these women who attempt to go against their gender roles, are rebuked by society. Dolly is deemed to be characterless by both her father and her fiancé. As Indu, representing Emilia, says in the film: "Indian women leave their homes and their families for their husbands, but still they are called characterless even by their own husbands" (2:05:17 - 2:05:39). In the end, Dolly's attempt at breaking her gender construct fails and she meekly accepts a death at her husband's hands on the night of her wedding. Upon realising his folly, Omkara shoots himself and dies next to his wife.

Judith Butler's concept of 'gender performativity' and Mary Ann Doan's concept of 'masquerade' are not just relevant to females. Masculinities are cultural constructs too and they are roles that are to be performed by males. This is arguably even more problematic in Indian society where men are asked to remain strong and not express their feelings with anyone. Ajay Devgn's brooding personality and Vishal Bhardwaj's 'hypermasculine' character work well together to further emphasise the fact that the entire tragedy could have been avoided if Omkara could have just communicated openly with her wife-to-be.

Much like the aforementioned films, in *Haider*, the complexity of *Hamlet* finds a suitable setting in the Indian milieu. The complexity, politics, the unrest & the disillusionment of Shakespeare's play, are controversially, but skillfully paralleled to the distressed and chaotic situation of religion and politics in Kashmir, which has caused the Kashmiri youth to become disillusioned and rebellious. Hamlet's famous soliloquy "To be or not to be...", is given greater political implications as it relates to the neither here nor there condition of Kashmiris.

The film portrays the troublesome politics of race and ethnicity that are present in Kashmir. Bhardwaj, using the theme of indecision, shows how the Kashmiri youth is confused about their racial and ethnic

identities, something which is used against them by power hungry leaders. The mysterious ghost of Hamlet's father, who is paramount in planting the seeds of vengeance in Hamlet's mind, is equated in the movie with Roohdaar, a Pakistani separatist played by a fascinating Irrfan. Through this slight modification, Bhardwaj carries the play's plot forward while at the same time deftly hining at how the grief, anger and confusion of young Kashmiris can be used by radicals to engulf them in a blanket of hatred and crime.

With Shradha Kapoor's portrayal of Ophelia, Vishal Bhardwaj once again presents the evolving Indian woman in his film, Arshia, who although just as sweet and innocent as Ophelia, is a strong, working woman, who is not afraid to stand up against the reprimands of her father (Polonius), or the more angry threats of her brother (Laertes). Having said that, as in Shakespeare's play, she remains a character who does not have a huge bearing on the action in the play. This is in contrast to Bhardwaj's reimagining of Gertrude as Ghazala. Played by a subtly provocative Tabu, the character is central to the plot while also becoming a representation of the plight and shackled desires of Kashmir's innumerable 'half-widows' — women who have no idea whether their husbands are dead or alive.

### Conclusion:

Jean-Louis Baudry, in a much anthologised essay, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," says that as the cinematic world appears natural, coherent and inevitable, it becomes an apt tool for reinforcing gender and racial norms and stereotypes. However, applying the same logic inversely, it might be argued that by showing the problems that lie in reiterating these norms and stereotypes, and by offering an alternative, films can also help break these constructs. Vishal Bhardwaj's films attempt to do exactly that, and I hope there are more filmmakers brave enough to do the same.

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