

From Venice to Uttar Pradesh: Adapting *Othello* to *Omkara*

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Abstract

This paper explores the adaptation of Shakespeare's Othello into Vishal Bhardwaj's Omkara through the lens of adaptation theory, focusing on the shift from the Venetian setting to rural Uttar Pradesh. Omkara reimagines the Shakespearean tragedy within the socio-political framework of India, translating themes of jealousy, power, and betrayal into the context of caste and regional power dynamics. By analysing how Omkara maintains the core narrative of Othello while transforming its characters, setting, and socio-cultural references, this paper investigates the tension between fidelity and creative freedom in adaptation. Using Robert Stam's theory of adaptation discussed in his work Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation, the study addresses how Bhardwaj's film retains Shakespeare's tragic essence while making it accessible and relevant to an Indian audience. The paper also examines how Omkara reconfigures the representation of gender and power, recontextualizing Desdemona/Dolly and Iago/Langda within an Indian patriarchal structure. Through this comparative analysis, the paper highlights the fluidity of storytelling across cultures and the significance of localizing universal narratives to reflect contemporary societal concerns. An in-depth analysis of both the play and the film depicts how each work of adaptation is free from its source text as described by Robert Stam in his theory of adaptation, and how an adapted work would be situated in its contemporary situation where the societal conditions, norms, and gender roles would vary with the changing time periods and spaces. A comparison between Shakespeare's Othello and Vishal Bhardwaj's Omkara shows how the issue of fidelity is totally out of question and how a piece of art transcends the temporal and spatial boundaries.

Keywords: Othello, Omkara, Adaptation Theory, Cultural Localization, Robert Stam

Literary works have always been translated, transmitted, and interpreted across cultures. Narratives have transcended the literary world and entered the world of films, plays, and other visual modes of representation. A vast number of literary pieces of Anglophone literature has been transformed both culturally and nationally across borders. The major works of the stalwarts of English literature have established their presence in the cross-cultural scenario where the characters, setting, and plot have been modified and given new nuances.

William Shakespeare's works have always been considered as the canonical works of English literature. The Bard of Avon penned his tragedies, comedies, historical plays, and tragicomedies that captivated not only the English literary audience but also extended and travelled nations and continents, and continues to be an integral part of study of any student of English literature, regardless of his or her national or cultural roots. Even after centuries have passed since Shakespeare penned his works, they are widely read and studied across cultures. Among them, the five major tragedies of the great playwright- King Lear, Othello, Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, and Hamlet- are still placed on the high pedestal and has been adapted across continents in the forms of plays, films, and other forms of media adaptation. One can find numerous film adaptations of these Shakespearean plays been carried out in the Indian subcontinent and this

paper tries to analyse one such film adaptation of Shakespeare's Othello- Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara*- going through a clear-cut analysis of both the play and the movie for their cultural disparities, and how the film retains Shakespeare's tragic essence while making it accessible and relevant to an Indian audience.

This paper explores the adaptation of Shakespeare's Othello into Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara* through the lens of adaptation theory, focusing on the shift from the Venetian setting to rural Uttar Pradesh. *Omkara* reimagines the Shakespearean tragedy within the socio-political framework of India, translating themes of jealousy, power, and betrayal into the context of caste and regional power dynamics. By analysing how the movie maintains the core narrative of Othello while transforming its characters, setting, and socio-cultural references, this paper investigates the tension between fidelity and creative freedom in adaptation. Using Robert Stam's theory of adaptation mentioned in the introductory chapter "Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation" of his work titled *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, the study addresses how Bhardwaj's film retains Shakespeare's tragic essence while making it accessible and relevant to an Indian audience. Through this comparative analysis, the paper highlights the fluidity of storytelling across cultures and the significance of localizing universal narratives to reflect contemporary societal concerns.

Shakespeare's renowned play Othello tells the story of Othello, a Moorish general in Venice, who marries Desdemona, the love of his life. Tragically, their marriage spirals into a disaster as Othello, consumed by jealousy, is manipulated by his treacherous ensign, Iago. Through a carefully crafted scheme, Iago poisons Othello's mind with suspicion, leading him to murder his innocent and devoted wife. Other characters in the play are reduced to mere pawns in Iago's malicious plot. The Indian film adaptation of this play by Vishal Bhardwaj, titled *Omkara*, has succeeded in teleporting the play from its Venetian setting into the rural outskirts of the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. Bhardwaj has brought changes that are necessary in the character portrayal and plot structure, so that the Shakespearean play could be easily assimilated into the Indian context. The characters of the film are given different names from that of the play, so that they go in with the Indian context- Othello as *Omkara* (Ajay Devgan), Desdemona as *Dolly* (Kareena Kapoor), Iago as *Langda* (Saif Ali Khan), Emilia as *Indu* (Konkona Sen Sharma), Cassio as *Kesu* (Vivek Oberoi), Bianca as *Billo* (Bipasha Basu), Roderigo as *Rajju* (Deepak Dobriyal), and the Duke of Venice as *Tiwari Bhaisaab* (Naseeruddin Shah). The movie further accounts to the Indian context by replacing the issue of race that is discussed in Othello is replaced with the issue of caste, and through the portrayal of the regional power dynamics of the Indian subcontinent.

This paper analyses the movie *Omkara* through the lens of adaptation theory by Robert Stam which is discussed in the introductory chapter of his work *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, edited by Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo. This work is a collection of essays that chart the history and merging of literature and film. It explores in detail a wide spectrum of novels and their adaptations. It gives an overview of some of the major issues on filmic adaptations and how the issue of 'fidelity' was discussed in the earlier days and how it is replaced in the present day with the idea of intertextuality and other concepts. According to Robert Stam, film is a form of writing that borrows from other forms of writing. Adaptation consists of the reading of a book and the writing of the scenario of a film. Stam mainly discusses about the elements that take part in the process of the adaptation of novels into films, which according to him, is also applicable to adaptation between any two genres.

...we can also see filmic adaptations as "mutations" that help their source novel "survive." Do not adaptations "adapt to" changing environments and changing tastes, as well as to a new medium, with its distinct industrial demands, commercial pressures, censorship taboos, and aesthetic norms? And are adaptations not a hybrid form like the orchid, the meeting place of different "species?" (Stam and Raengo 3).

Stam talks about the challenges and criticism that the process of adaptation faces such as the idea that the older arts are superior than the new art forms. "The venerable art of literature, within this logic, is seen as inherently superior to the younger art of cinema" (Stam and Raengo 4). The writer and the filmmaker are two

people who are travelling in the same boat but they both harbour a secret desire to throw the other overboard. Earlier critics saw films as the “Oedipal sons” who slayed their “father”, the source text. The traditionalists believed that “film and other visual media seem to threaten the collapse of the symbolic order, the erosion of the powers of the literary fathers, patriarchal narrators, and consecrated arts” (Stam and Raengo 5).

But according to the author, adaptations at times provoke an outrage that is not provoked by the source book. “While novels are absorbed through the mind’s eye during reading, films directly engage the various senses” (Stam and Raengo 6). The cinema’s engagement with the body of the performer, spectator, and with that of the film itself transforms it as a serious, transcendent art form. According to Robert Stam, adaptations have undergone numerous criticisms such as the “dumbed down” versions of their source novels and as parasites on literature which burrow into the body of the source text and steal its vitality.

The structuralist and poststructuralist theoretical developments subverted many of these prejudices and hierarchies that gave the novel the superior position over cinema, and Robert Stam establishes himself as the descendant of all those theoreticians who tried to bring out a change on the way in which film adaptations looked upon. Stam takes the help of Derridean deconstruction and the transtextuality theory of Gerard Genette, under which the theory of intertextuality is discussed. In Derridean perspective, “the prestige of the original is created by the copies” (Stam and Raengo 8) and “the very idea of originality has no meaning” (Stam and Raengo 8). The poststructuralist analysis “fissured the author as point of origin of art” (Stam and Raengo 9). Further, Stam depends on the Bakhtinian notion of “author and character as multi-discursive and resistant to unification” (Stam and Raengo 9). For Stam, adaptation is an orchestration of discourses- a hybrid construction mingling discourses. Performativity theory visualizes both novel and adaptation as performances, “one verbal and the other visual, verbal, and acoustic” (Stam and Raengo 10). Going through all these theoretical approaches towards adaptation, Stam perceives novels, films, and adaptations as “neighbours or collaborators rather than as father and son or master and slave” (Stam and Raengo 12).

The question of fidelity is unnecessary according to Stam as it might mean a thirty-hour version of War and Peace and there is a possibility that the performer who matches the physical description of the character might be a mediocre actor. Alain Resnais has suggested that simply adapting a novel without changing it is like reheating a meal. The material adequacy of a film when compared to the novel affects the scenes which can be filmed from the vast number of scenes in the novel that were born out of imagination and is free from material constraints. “A filmic adaptation is automatically different and original due to the change of medium” (Stam and Raengo 17).

In film, we not only hear the words, but also witness the facial expressions associated with them. The cinema has rather greater resources for expression than the novel. Thus, the superior-inferior status given to the novel and the cinema is unnecessary according to Robert Stam. “As a technology of representation, film has the capacity to mingle very diverse temporalities and spatialities” (Stam and Raengo 21). While novels have only a single entity- the character- film adaptations have both character and performer. Cinema is endowed with famous definitions “in terms of other arts- “painting in motion” (Canuda); “sculpture in motion” (Vachel Lindsay); “music of light” (Abel Gance); “architecture in movement” (Elle Faure)” (Stam and Raengo 24). Robert Stam talks about Gerard Genette’s concept of metatextuality where there is a critical relation between one text and another. Adaptations can be “readings or critiques of their source novel” (Stam and Raengo 28).

The three tenets of order (when and in what sequence), duration (how long), and frequency (how often) all undergo changes when adapted from one form to another. Films tell stories as well as stage them. The source novel “can be seen as a situated utterance, produced in one medium and in one historical and social context, and later transformed into another, equally situated utterance, produced in a different context and relayed through a different medium” (Stam and Raengo 45,46). Adaptations turn the linguistic energy of writing into the audio-visual-kinetic-performative energy of the adaptation. Thus, adaptations are “oriented not by inchoate notions of fidelity but rather by attention to transfers of creative energy” (Stam and Raengo

46). These theoretical discussions by Robert Stam in his work *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* extends their application not just to the film adaptation of the novel genre, but also the transformation between any two genres. And this paper deals with one such adaptation- a Shakespearean play into an Indian film.

The Indian film adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Othello*, titled *Omkara*, erases the question of fidelity from the minds of the viewers, by adopting necessary deviations as well as conforming to the play wherever suitable. The Indian *Othello* and his surroundings face a contrasting difference from his Venetian background. Shakespeare's *Othello* is a Moorish Venetian General while the Indian *Othello*- *Omkara*- is a General to Tiwari Bhaisaab, the political leader. The play starts with Iago and Roderigo planning together to inform Desdemona's father, Brabantio, about the elopement of his daughter with the "thick-lips", "old black ram", and the "Barbary horse" *Othello*, while the film starts with Langda Tyagi (the Indian counterpart of Iago) warning Rajju (Roderigo) about the abduction of his bride-to-be Dolly (Desdemona) by *Omkara*.

Iago is fuelled with the burning anger and jealousy towards Cassio at the beginning of the play itself- the newly appointed lieutenant of *Othello* who is not at all eligible for the position when a brave warrior like Iago, who has fought and has won numerous battles, is alive. The movie narrates the tale of this jealousy and hatred few minutes later where the appointment of Kesu (Cassio) as the new General in place of *Omkara* who is now Bhaisaab's representative in the Lok Sabha. This is a clear-cut example of how an English novel, when brought into an Indian context, changes its colours. Langda is portrayed as one with a limp, foreshadowing the wickedness hidden inside him. The issue of race in the Western context is replaced with the issue of caste in the Indian context when *Othello* is described as "the Moor" intending to his black race, while *Omkara* is frequently addressed as a half-caste in the movie. The play presents *Omkara* narrating his love story while in the film, Dolly narrates how she fell with the brave General.

The lyrics of the songs in the movie foreshadow the impending tale of jealousy and trickery. It translates thus: "Do not trust what your eyes say. Your eyes will betray you... The poison of the eyes is very intoxicating" (*Omkara* 16:26-19:14). Both the fathers, Brabantio as well as Vakkeel Saab warns the son-in-law about the two-faced monster a woman can be and how a daughter who has deceived her father would cheat upon her husband too. These lines later torments both the protagonists in the latter half. Langda's disappointment in not being selected as the new General is clearly shown in the movie which leads to his acts of trickery and decisiveness that follows. Roderigo laments about drowning out of the disappointment in not getting to marry Desdemona while Rajju literally jumps into the water for Dolly. Iago's intention to trick *Othello* into suspecting his wife, using Roderigo as a mere pawn in his game, as well as his suspicion of his wife Emilia having an affair with *Othello*- all of these are presented through his words in the third act of the first scene in the play itself, while the movie only gradually unfolds these truths.

The imageries that are used by Shakespeare to define the racial difference that defines *Othello* in others' mind is replaced with the phrases which Indu (Emilia) uses in describing the newly married couple, which translate as: "Like milk in a pot of coal, like a candy in a crow's mouth, like sandal shining in the darkest night, like magic flute in the hands of the Dark Lord" (*Omkara* 36:56-37:27). In the play, Desdemona goes to Cyprus with *Othello*, Iago, and Cassio while in the play Dolly goes to *Omkara*'s house with Langda and Kesu. On one hand, the play shows Iago's evil intentions with Desdemona and Cassio through his dialogues, and on the other hand, the movie shows Langda noticing Dolly and Kesu's closeness as collegemates during his son's birthday party.

Cassio is looked down upon by Iago in the play because he sees the former as a mere mathematician who has only theoretical knowledge in war affairs and no experience. On the other hand, Kesu is scoffed by people for his flirtatious attitude towards women. Both Iago and Langda succeeds in making Cassio and Kesu lose their mind respectively by making them drink alcohol which the latter has little tolerance for. The scene turns bad as Cassio and Kesu, in the play and movie respectively, attacks some of the people in the crowd, resulting in him losing the position endowed upon him by *Othello/Omkara*. The movie scene goes thus: Billo

(Bianca), Kesu's love interest, is suffocated by the smoke from Rajju's cigarette, which infuriates a drunken Kesu who beats him badly. Billo is presented as a public dancer who entertains men, thus incorporating two item dances in the movie- a cultural representation of the Indian society. Cassio is drunk at the celebration in Cyprus on the destruction of the Turkish fleet as well as Othello's marriage, while Kesu loses his sense during the celebration of his appointment as the new General.

Othello gifts a handkerchief as a token of love to Desdemona in the play and Omkara hands over his family heirloom- a waistband- to Dolly in the movie- both of which serve as the main evidence for the fabricated relationship story by Iago/Langda- when they are stolen by Emilia/Indu and reaches the hands of her husband. Iago and his Indian counterpart Langda advise the plan to Cassio/Kesu to get the latter back in his lost position.i.e., to make Desdemona/Dolly plead on his behalf to her husband. He assures that he will keep Othello away so that Cassio/ Kesu and Desdemona/Dolly can have a private talk. In the play, Cassio exits just when he sees Othello approaching and, in the movie, Kesu leaves Omkara's house when the latter comes back unexpectedly from Tiwari Bhaisaab. Langda implements his plan very smoothly as he calls to the town for the namesake of making sure that Kesu is there, and later tells Omkara that he is not.

In the movie, Indu tells Langda that he has an animal caged inside him after they enjoy a night of passion, which clearly denotes the true animal that Langda/Iago is hiding within him. Desdemona/Dolly continues to pester her husband about forgiving Cassio/Kesu, which disturbs Othello/Omkara. In addition to this, Iago/Langda adds fuel to the fire by telling his master to keep an eye on his wife and the lieutenant/General as they are early acquaintances and their close relationship may lead to something else. Langda acts as being too honest and caring such that he hands over his duty of killing Kichlu (one of Indore Singh's men- Bhaisaab's men) to Kesu so that he can gain Omkara's love, but fails to do so. Just as Iago succeeds in his plan to leave Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's house, Langda also wins in gifting Kesu with Dolly's waistband, asking him to give it to Billo as a present for luring Kichlu in the murder trap. After this, Langda talks about Kesu giving a waistband for Billo to wear and then the two having the best time of their life, which infuriates Omkara who asks Dolly for the waistband and hits for not finding it.

Omkara is overcome with suspicion and jealousy and asks Langda to answer the question whether there is something going on between his wife and Kesu. Langda tells that they are in a relationship and that he heard Kesu mutter in his sleep that if their love must live, they will have to hide it from the world. In the play, Iago talks about sleeping beside Cassio who cried to Desdemona in his sleep, killed Iago and lay his leg on Iago's thighs and cursed the moor for having Desdemona. This, along with the sight of his precious token of love in Kesu/Cassio's house gives Omkara/Othello the proof that he wanted. In the play, Iago makes Othello order that Cassio is to be killed, while Langda shoots Kesu from behind. Iago plans to kill Cassio by using Roderigo when he goes to a dinner with Bianca, and on the other hand, Langda attacks Kesu when he goes behind Billo, who is extremely angry on him. Cassio has no intentions of marrying Bianca in the play but in the movie, it is the opposite. Rajju is killed by Kesu in the movie while Iago kills Roderigo in the play after the latter is stabbed by Cassio.

There is a scene in the movie where Indu asks Omkara not to marry if he has a slightest doubt on Dolly, and it is no wonder that he suspected her when the holy scriptures themselves have sullied women. This becomes a feminist commentary from Bhardwaj's side marking the discrimination unleashed against women in the Indian society, thus situating the 16th century play in the contemporary Indian context. Desdemona/Dolly is smothered to death by her husband who is now overbrimmed with jealousy, hatred, and suspicion. The play ends with Iago killing Emilia, confessing that he was the one who dropped Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's house, Cassio talking about a letter from dead Roderigo's pocket telling how Iago asked him to offend Cassio earlier and put him to a rage, and at last Othello killing himself. The play has an alternative ending, differing in one factor that Langda is murdered by Indu who is shocked to realize the malicious plans of her husband, just for the sake of a general's position. This alternative ending indeed showcases the voice of the Indian society where women need to act against the wrongdoer in their lives who crushes their lives under their feet.

This detailed, in-depth analysis of both the play and the film depicts how each work of adaptation is free from its source text as described by Robert Stam in his theory of adaptation, and how an adapted work would be situated in its contemporary situation where the societal conditions, norms, and gender roles would vary with the changing time periods and spaces. A comparison between Shakespeare's *Othello* and Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara* shows how the issue of fidelity is totally out of question and how a piece of art transcends the temporal and spatial boundaries.

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