

Nuancing the Negative: The Significance of the Nuanced Portrayal of Shakespearean Villains in Vishal Bhardwaj's Omkara and Haider

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ABSTRACT:

This article looks at how the characters who play the role of Shakespeare's villains are constructed differently in Vishal Bhardwaj's two Hindi movie versions of Othello and Hamlet, called Omkara and Haider, respectively; and what implications this has for using Shakespeare's works in a postcolonial context. Both of Bhardwaj's films are based closely on their respective source texts: Othello (the basis for Omkara) and Hamlet (the basis for Haider); however, in contrast to Shakespeare's classical villains that can be defined by their evilness or their evil deeds, Bhardwaj's villains represent evolved characters, whose motivations are historically determined, multilayered with psychological scrutiny, and culturally embedded. The theories of narrative desire by Langdon Elsbree, Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence, and postcolonial re-adaptation theories articulated by Julie Sanders and Ania Loomba provide the main theoretical framework in this study. The article argues that Bhardwaj's villains—most notably Langda Tyagi (the Iago character in Omkara) and Khurram (the Claudius character in Haider)—cannot be classified as purely good or purely evil because they share socioeconomic issues, are from different regions of India, and are existing within differing political climates. In this sense, Bhardwaj's films re-contextualize the villainous trope from being a means of defining theatricality to being an important place for examining issues of caste and nationality, as well as to examine the impact of colonialism on contemporary India. This article concludes that Bhardwaj's use of "nuancing" in the portrayal of these antagonistic characters encourages the audience to view themselves as responsible for the structures that create these types of individuals. The author concludes that this use of nuance is the most significant departure from and contribution to the Shakespearean canon made by Bhardwaj's films.

Keywords: Shakespeare adaptation, Vishal Bhardwaj, villainy, Omkara, Haider, postcolonial cinema, anxiety of influence, narrative desire

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Introduction

The representation of evil on the stage is much more complex than it appears at first look. At the same time, there is significant variation in the scale of evil displayed by the various villains represented on a Shakespearean stage including a) a fully confessional character, Richard III, b) a philosophically restless character, Iago, and c) a morally indecisive character, Claudius. Each of these characters seeks to gain understanding from the audience rather than solely being condemned. However, in general, this theme of domesticating evil by European theatrical tradition has resulted in a benign form of evil by providing clear moral frameworks to work within the context of the performance. It is this very domestication of evil, which is rejected by the work of Vishal Bhardwaj.

Bhardwaj's adaptations of Shakespeare into Hindi language movies *Maqbool* (2003), *Omkara* (2006), and *Haider* (2014) constitute a significant contribution to world cinema as an extraordinary trilogy of Hindi language adaptations of Shakespeare. These works have taken the existing narrative structures and character types of Shakespearean works and transferred them to the culturally and socially specific locations of contemporary Indian life making them relevant to Indian culture today through the use of the Mumbai underworld, rural Uttar Pradesh and the Kashmir Valley as the settings for each of the three stories. Bhardwaj's treatment of Shakespeare is one of what Julie Sanders calls appropriation (the second stage of adaptation) which indicates that he has taken the source work and adapted it to support his own artistic and cultural objectives (Sanders 26).

The focus of this article is two films – *Omkara* and *Haider* – and their respective antagonists: Langda Tyagi (Saif Ali Khan) as Iago from *Othello*, and Khurram Meer (Kay Kay Menon) as Claudius from *Hamlet*. The author has chosen to investigate these two characters as a pairing because they are both villains that have been significantly altered by the adaptation process through their socio-political and psychological dimensions, and that this complexity adds to their moral ambiguity. The author argues that

Bhardwaj has created a more nuanced representation of these Shakespearean villains than has been done in previous adaptations, thereby representing the films' greatest aesthetic, ideological, and humanistic success. By transforming villainy from a plot device into an examination of the conditions that lead to moral failure, the films provide no less than a mirror of malicious structures rather than of malicious individuals.

This article is structured as a literature review, identifying an under-researched area of scholarship pertaining to the question of villain construction in Bhardwaj's films, then outlining the specific research questions and theoretical framework for analysis, followed by discussions of close reading and then finally concluding with general reflections on the implications of nuancing the negative.

Literature Review and Gap

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, there has been tremendous growth in scholarship on Shakespeare in Indian cinema. Poonam Trivedi and Dennis Bartholomeusz's edited collection *Shakespeare and India* (2005) offers foundational mapping of the terrain by locating Shakespearean appropriation in India in terms of colonial, nationalist and postcolonial frameworks. Trivedi's own study of Bhardwaj includes her essay "'Filmi' Shakespeare," which discusses how Bhardwaj uses Bollywood tropes such as song and dance and melodrama to indigenize the plays (Trivedi 289). M. K. Naik and Shyamala A. Narayan's *Indian English Literature 1980–2000* (2001), while primarily focusing on literary rather than cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare, provides important context regarding Shakespeare's assimilation into South Asian cultural production over a longer history.

More specifically, Shormistha Panja has theorized on "Bollywood Shakespeare" by investigating the genre conventions that Bhardwaj exploits and subverts. Panja has noted the tension derived from Bhardwaj's realist tendencies and the traditionally ostentatious requirements presented by commercial Hindi cinema; she argues that this tension produces a productive synthesis (Panja

167). Rajesh Kumar Sharma's essay "Shakespeare and the Problem of Postcolonial Indian Cinema" (2012) situates Bhardwaj within wider historical and political contexts regarding the issue of postcolonial cultural appropriation and questions whose interests are being served when formerly colonized people. On a theoretical basis, Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) has provided a very important way to think about how later artists engage with their predecessors, and how they use their predecessors to create and establish themselves as artists and create their individual artistic styles. Bloom's theory about "misreading," which refers to the creative swerve where poets/artists use the original text as a springboard to reconstruct their own authority by re-presenting the text, has been applied in many examples of Shakespeare's adaptations; from the work of Michael Dobson in his recently published (1992) book *The Making of the National Poet*, to Julie Sanders in her book *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006); both of whom are using Bloom's theory for both literary and political purposes. Ania Loomba's book *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (2002) provides critical tools to help us read the issues of race, power, and empire within Shakespeare's texts; and provides tools that can usefully cross over into postcolonial adaptation contexts.

In terms of psychological and sociological approaches to villainy, the works of Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor in the areas of both editorial and interpretive traditions of Shakespeare's villains will remain valuable resources. Also, a more recent example by Michael Bristol in *Shakespeare's America, America's Shakespeare* (1990) examines the different ways that moral systems represented in Shakespeare travel across cultures and are transformed during their journey. In terms of Indian cinema, Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen's *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* (1999) serves as a foundational source for this area of study.

There is a substantial void in the literature with regard to how critics have assessed Bhardwaj's 'Shakespearean' adaptations from the perspectives of genre, nationalism, gender, and postcolonialism to date, but there has been little

sustained attention to how Bhardwaj has redesigned the motivations, psychology and social structure of Shakespearean villains, and how these renovations are the primary humanistic projects of his films. Most criticisms view villains as secondary to protagonists and appear to accept Bhardwaj's perfection of Shakespeare's stories while overlooking a much greater revolution occurring within the characterization of his antagonists in comparison to Shakespeare's original characters. This article will fill that gap.

Research Questions

This article is organised around three principal research questions:

1. How does Bhardwaj's adaptation of Iago as Langda Tyagi in *Omkara* and Claudius as Khurram Meer in *Haider* transform the motivational and psychological architecture of Shakespeare's portrayal of villains?
2. In what ways do caste, regional identity, and political context function as explanatory frameworks for the villains' actions in the two films, and how do these frameworks depart from Shakespeare's source texts?
3. What is the ideological and humanistic significance of the films' refusal to render their antagonists as simply evil, and how does this nuance relate to broader postcolonial and cinematic concerns?

Theoretical Framing

Three theories will be discussed in the following paragraphs. The first is Harold Bloom's concept of the anxiety of influence; in his book *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Bloom argues that poets develop their identities as strong poets separate from other poets by what he calls a "clinamen", which is an intentional misreading of the previous work, or "swerve". In applying this theory to films that have been adapted from Shakespeare, the purpose of this framework is to say that the films do not fail because they do not adhere to Shakespeare's original way of thinking; instead, they succeed by creating their own form of artistic authority within the current time frame (Bhardwaj uses various types of Shakespeare's

villains in his adaptations). As well, the way that Bhardwaj's portrayal of the villains of Shakespeare develops from that of the originals demonstrates a clear fulfilment of Bloom's theory, as the misreadings were constructive instances of misinterpretation that allowed Bhardwaj to create representations of the historical and cultural periods before, during, and after the period of Shakespeare; therefore, it alters the way the obvious deviations from Shakespeare's original works are viewed and interpreted in literature today, as they are now seen as creating rather than as a specific deficiency or lack thereof.

The second framework comes from Julie Sanders and her adaptation theory. Sanders distinguishes between both adaptation (where the source text retains its place in the new text) and appropriation (where the source text has been used for a purpose that is not in agreement with the source text but is still present). The manner in which Bhardwaj uses Shakespearean villains to develop the plot, themes, and meaning of his adaptations decidedly falls into the category of appropriation of those characters from the source text; they are made to carry with them all of the meanings that are present in the original text, while also adding to their interpretation in relation to caste, state, and colonialism through the adaptations of those Shakespearean figures contained within Bhardwaj's *Ania Loomba's* postcolonial perspective of Shakespeare undergirds the third framework by asserting that the ideologies of early colonialism were encoded in Shakespeare's texts through the construction of Otherness based on race, religion, and culture (Loomba 2002). Reading these texts from a postcolonial perspective exposes the ideologies they normalise and, therefore, do not merely recuperate them as alternative readings (Loomba 2). Bhardwaj's adaptations serve as postcolonial acts by taking the coloniser's canon and thoroughly investigating that canon through a postcolonial lens. Within villain construction, an apparent moral failing in the original text results, in the adaptation, from a structurally constituted reality. Thus the villain is not an isolated aberrant

condition; the villain exemplifies a system manifest in corporeal form.

A fourth framework that adds to the three major frameworks is narrative desire, as posited by Langdon Elsbree—specifically, the urgent need of characters to compensate for lack—that results in the development of narrative tension (Elsbree 1982). Elsbree argues that desire is the primary component driving character action. The development of tension is created through the frustration and/or eventual transformation of desire (Elsbree 41). Narrative desire will be particularly helpful when examining the character of Langda Tyagi, since he demonstrates his villainous characterisation by way of a specific and tangible lack—social recognition due to physical disability and caste adaptations as social commentary on contemporary social issues.

Iago is one of Shakespeare's most famous evil characters, and he is perhaps the most philosophically difficult character in the canon. His stated reason for hating Othello is that he did not get the promotion that he thought was due to him, but most critics agree that this is insufficient reason to mount the horrific campaign against Othello, Cassio, and Desdemona that Iago carries out. Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously called Iago's reasons for his actions "motiveless malignity" (Coleridge 49). This phrase has influenced Iago criticism in the years since then. The implication of Coleridge's phrase is that there is no explanation for Iago's evil, and that he is essentially a depraved person rather than someone who could have been created by the circumstances of his life; because of this, Iago represents an ideal of evil outside the realm of human causation, and therefore outside of the realm of responsibility for the creation of evil as defined by the social world.

The radical innovation of Bhardwaj's film is to give Iago a reason. Langda Tyagi (which means "lame one" in Hindi, establishing a narrative and physical difference from the beginning), like Iago, is a trustworthy subordinate passed over for a promotion. However, in Bhardwaj's version, this grievance against Othello has physical and social significance. Tyagi is physically disabled; as he

walks with a visible limp, this physical handicap is a social signifier, but it also has an aesthetic meaning. In the rural caste system that is shown in the film, there is an implicit association between social value, status, and masculinity created through an association between these categories and physical in Saif Ali Khan is an integral part of the overall production. While many interpretations of Iago have focused on Iago's happy self-satisfaction, Saif Khan's Tyagi is much more complicated due to his simmering anger, many moments of authentic affection (particularly towards Indu, who is the same as Emilia), and varying degrees of frailty. He doesn't act with evil intent; he represents the idea of surviving with a bad attitude. In a pivotal scene, television Tyagi tells Omkara (Ajay Devgn) he is "Main haramzada hoon—par aapke liye" ("I am a bastard—but for you"), which expresses the ambiguity in his position as loyal enough to engage in acts of moral degradation for this commander he follows but found outside of the social order that this same commander represents. He doesn't suffer from Coleridge's lack of motivation in his evilness. Instead, it has much motivation and historical basis, along with significant justification for it.

This villainy can be viewed as the transferring of already unfulfilled, legitimate desire onto an illegitimate plane, by reading Tyagi's actions within the concept of Elsbree's narrative desire framework. His legitimate desires consist of a need for recognition, a need for social belonging, and a need to be treated equally with people. The story has no legitimate means to satisfy these desires, so he finds a way to gain power by proxy by using Omkara's greater strength to eliminate his competition, which represents everything that he cannot be.

Bhardwaj complicates the representation of Tyagi within the milieu of electoral violence in Uttar Pradesh. The robbers and gangsters depicted in Omkara can not only be understood as criminals and thugs, but as political figures who are working on behalf of political authorities. In this way, Tyagi's acts of betrayal can be seen as extensions of his agency, and as part of a political

economy that favours the use of violence as a legitimate form of currency.

As such, the context of Tyagi's betrayal shifts away from the individual moral scale to that which is derived from the established socio-political order of Uttar Pradesh, representing the precise postcolonial move that is illustrated in Loomba's theoretical construct: that the structural production of villainy is linked to the failure of individuals, through nothing more than their caste and disability status, to be able to use the aspirational attributes of the social order to create a sustainable future.

In terms of Tyagi's character development, the most significant accomplishment of the film is what it does not include: it does not show any gratuitous acts of violence or cruelty. All of Tyagi's acts of deception and manipulation are amusingly comedic, and all have some relation to the original injury that Tyagi sustained in his youth; in this way, the film is able to achieve humanistic nuance not through outright redemption for Tyagi, but rather through the emphasis placed on understanding him and his actions.

The culpability that Tyagi possesses as a result of his betrayal will always remain with him, and at the same time the weight of the culpability of the rest of society and its effect on Tyagi, as a member of society, will also remain with him.

Colonial Trauma, Political Violence, and Ambiguity: Khurram Meer in Haider

Bhardwaj's Haider (2014) is the most politically audacious of his three adaptations from Shakespeare. The film takes place in Kashmir during the turbulent period of the mid-1990s when the Indian Army conducted brutal counter-insurgency operations and residents of the Valley found themselves at the mercy of both militant groups and state security forces. As it relates to Hamlet, the film presents a conflict zone where the exercise of state power has compromised the concept of justice. The "rotteness" Hamlet perceives in Denmark becomes, in Haider, the systematic rotteness of military occupation; enforced disappearances, torture in custody, and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which

grants security forces immunity from civilian prosecution.

Claudius, like Hamlet, is both a murderer and a usurper, but he is also an effective and politically astute king. Hamlet's own ambivalence toward Claudius suggests that while Claudius is evil, his evil is intertwined with legitimate political effectiveness. Bhardwaj further develops the duality of Claudius into a postcolonial context by creating Khurram Meer (Kay Kay Menon), who is a schoolmaster and collaborates with the Indian Army to obtain protection and career development in exchange for intelligence. Khurram's motive in killing his brother Dr. Hilal Meer (Narendra Jha) is not purely in Bhardwaj's treatment of happiness diverges most sharply from Shakespeare in terms of the motivations for villainy. In Shakespeare's play, Claudius committed fratricide motivated by desire and ambition—these are vices with private origins. In contrast, Khurram's fratricide is a function of his collaboration with an external, occupying power. As such, his act of fratricide is at least equally a political act and a personal act of evil. The postcolonial framework that Loomba describes—whereby colonial and quasi-colonial forms of power distort the individual's moral life—is very much present in this context. That is to say, Khurram's evil cannot be separated from the evil of the very society he resides in and operates within, and which, to a significant degree, has also compelled his actions.

Kay Kay Menon's performance as Khurram is a masterful example of suppressed guilt and the proper use of functional charm in acting. In one scene, following Khurram's marriage to Ghazala (the equivalent of Gertrude), played by Tabu, he has a moment of uncomfortable but genuine affection for his stepson, Haider, while playing a game with him. It is precisely this disquietude present in the moment of warmth that makes it so compelling. This is not a monster's face; it is a face of a man who has done a monstrous act, and made peace with that act. The filmmakers have chosen not to allow the audience to merely interpret this scene as ironic; as a result, they have created an ambiguity by which the audience can entertain the notion that Khurram is evil (an

interpretation that could easily lead to the conclusion that he is a monster) and that he may actually be capable of feeling a wide array of emotions motivated by ambition.

Bhardwaj interprets the anxiety of the influence in terms of the structural relationships between himself and Hamlet's Claudius. Bhardwaj performs a "swerve" from the privately vicious to the politically collaborative as the basis for separating the two brothers in fratricide—that is, the misreading of either man's connection to the other is both total and productive; thus, generating new meanings that the original text cannot hold.

In this respect, the principal formal and textual referent for the film is Basharat Peer's memoir *Curfewed Night* (2010). Peer provides a firsthand account of growing up in Kashmir during an ongoing conflict based on his life experience. Peer ascribes Khurram in the context of Claudius and in the context of real histories; therefore, he requires that the audience appreciate that context to critique Khurram's behavior as morally reprehensible. Unlike other films, which provide a refuge for viewers to escape from real-life concerns about morality, Haider forces viewers to grapple with the s The film's most ambiguous and conflicting sequence revolves around Haider's final decision—his refusal of vengeance and his assumption of a form of tragic martyrdom. This decision is largely dependent on the nuance associated with Khurram's characterization. Haider is unable to carry out his desire for straightforward revenge, not simply as Hamlet's well-known paralysis translated into this film but also from a formal recognition of the fact that in an environment, where mistreatment and wrongdoing are structurally inherent, straightforward revenge represents a moral reaction that falls short of the situation. Thus, the character of the nuanced villain, produces a morally ambiguous decision (for Haider) and comparable ambiguity (for the audience).

Nuanced Villainy: Humanistic Tools of Politics—Comparative Illustrations

As Tyagi and Khurram show, there is a consistent authorial philosophy. Bhardwaj has no interest in

absolving his villains of their actions or in providing any reduction to their moral culpability. Each character has an associated set of behaviours, which can be defined as manipulative behaviours, murder behaviours and betrayal behaviours as having true accountability in their actions. What these films do portray is the fantasy that such actions are a result of random, causeless malevolence. As Loomba describes, the concept of a structural, conclusive framework gives to us an absence of examination, regarding the conditions of where they originated socio-political and historical realities that have shaped Khurram's character.

The refusal at the heart of these films has a certain meaning in relation to their respective Shakespeare originals. In *Othello* and *Hamlet*, the nature of the villains' malignancy is, to varying degrees, somewhat obscured—a sort of obscureness that is used to create theatrical impact, but that ultimately does not get fully explained. Bhardwaj's illumination adds to or supplements these early texts by providing social and political context that can be read on the Elizabethan stage. While a reader may find that they have written these subsequent pieces as an act of rivalry (through an anxiety about their influence on Shakespeare), a reader who is familiar with the concept of a reader's perceiving their inability to illuminate the past provides them with insight into what the original works (and their history) had been denied and are now receiving.

The cultural specificity of both films is also of importance in relation to their viewer demographics. In a way that goes beyond their original forms on the stage to their original texts, Bhardwaj's characters are representative of unique regional contexts, such that viewers from either Uttar Pradesh or Kashmir can hear and understand the social and political environment from which Tyagi and Khurram have emerged as women. This recognition of the villain's role within a particular culture, society, and time period can be found in either of these films and is central to the moral project of the films: by creating characters whose problems are based in the social and political situations of their

communities, the viewer's identification with the villains in the two films does not necessarily lead them to be able to simply condemn them; the viewer must understand the conditions within which Tyagi and Khurram operate within their cultural and social settings before they can render a moral judgment.

The framework of appropriation developed by Sanders fits this situation perfectly. By appropriating the villains of Shakespeare, Bhardwaj is creating arguments regarding caste, job, and moral failure in postcolonial societies that Shakespeare could not make for himself. The original text provides a source of cultural authority and a narrative framework, but the ideological work being done is Bhardwaj's alone; he simply appropriates the names and plots of Shakespeare's plays as an alibi to lend legitimacy to the film's attempt to pursue radical political agendas.

Bhardwaj also creates a metacinematic element to the depictions of these villains. He is working with the Hindi film tradition, which has its own conventions surrounding villainy; and by 2006 and 2014, those conventions were extensively being interrogated by parallel and multiplex cinema. Bhardwaj's fully realised, socially grounded villains (Tyagi and Khurram) are a departure from both the archetype of Shakespeare's villains and from the archetypal Bollywood villain who was often defined by excess -- excessive menace, excessive artifice and excessive spectacle. The antagonists created by Bhardwaj are notable for their restraint, normalcy, and recognisability. They are depicted in contrast to the protagonist and can often be imagined as being someone you know.

Conclusion

Omkara and Haider's elaborate representation of Shakespeare's evil characters is not merely a reflection of Bhardwaj's artistic talent but represents a fundamental and compassionate aspect of his creative process. By placing Langda Tyagi's resentment in a social and physical context and situating Khurram Meer's criminality within political violence associated with the Kashmir conflict, Bhardwaj shifts the inherited

archetypes of malevolence into intelligible, from their historical backgrounds and contexts of genesis, human beings. While Bhardwaj complicates moral responsibility by placing responsibility on both the individual and the structures that create him, he does not lessen moral accountability.

The theoretical frameworks used to analyze Bhardwaj's films (Bloom's theory of anxiety of influence, Sanders's theory of adaptation and appropriation, Loomba's theory of postcolonial Shakespeare, and Elsbree's theory of narrative desire) all converge to support a single point: In postcolonial situations, to complicate the negative is an aesthetic act but also a political act. To make a villain intelligible is to implicate the system that has produced him; to deny the comfort of a wholly malevolent character will lead to the requirement for a more serious social accounting of the reasons for the villain's behaviour. In the body of scholarly work devoted to Vishal Bhardwaj, his films are not considered mere adaptations of Shakespeare's works. Instead, they are viewed as critiques of the social realities that create immoral behavior based on borrowings from the original texts, there is substantive praise for his innovative approach to film relies heavily on the elements of music and the way in which he has employed regional authenticity in his films. Nevertheless, this paper contends that the process by which Bhardwaj constructs his villains deserves to be subject to continued critical scrutiny on its own merit and represents Bhardwaj's single most important contribution to the body of work of Shakespearean adaptations. Future studies could

yield fertile ground by focusing on the final film in this trilogy—*Maqbool*—and its treatment of *Lady Macbeth*—as it approaches Shakespeare, and how the portrayal of a villainous figure is nuanced within the context of a character whose motivation shifts between being a villain and being a victim. What Bhardwaj has demonstrated is that a Shakespearean villain does not lose its significance when transferred to present day India; instead, it develops a much stronger bond with the soil. And this bond is what gives that figure authenticity most recognised playwrights in world literature.

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