

**CONSTRAINED WOMEN IN *OMKARA*: MARRIAGE, MYTHOLOGY, AND  
MOVIES**

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
August 2017

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Dedicated to my mother for encouraging me to take a leap of faith and follow my  
passion.

I would also like to thank my supervisor for the tremendous support provided.

Above all, I would like to thank Almighty God for rendering a new direction to my  
academic life.

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## ABSTRACT

Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara* is an unconventional Bollywood film that draws on the story of *Othello* to explore themes of suppression and vengeance that can be traced back to Indian mythology. The film invokes the allure of Bollywood to present a picture of patriarchy confirming that, for women in rural India, marriage is a space of confinement. This thesis focuses on the universal and permanent thematic structures that Bhardwaj highlights through his amalgamation of *Othello* with stories from Indian mythology resulting in a unique product in *Omkara*. This thesis propounds that women like Dolly, Indu, and Billoo, who are the female characters in *Omkara*, are at a disadvantage in marriage and, as the way they occupy various spaces further implies, they are therefore doomed to failure as individuals.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare may be universally adaptable, but there are certain constraints that language and culture impose. Vishal Bhardwaj's Hindi adaptation *Omkara*, a modern-day, rural representation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, grapples with such constraints in the film's setting of a small town in the North Indian province of Uttar Pradesh. Like most small towns in India, the village in Uttar Pradesh is also a transient space trying to find its footing amidst Western influences, whilst retaining its traditional foundation. As Brinda Charry and Gitanjali Shahani suggest,

The small town is... not without its tensions. Like the Cyprus of *Othello*, it is a liminal space located between the traditional village and the globalized city, the "eternal east", often signified by rural India, and the "West" that is seen as the originating point of colonialism, globalism, and Shakespeare. It is a site of rootedness and transformation, where traditional values, including respect for elders, family, and caste structures, and the subordination of women coexist alongside the changes that make inter-caste marriages for love even conceivable. (115)

It is within this hybrid space that the audience encounters Dolly, Indu, and Billoo, the three female characters who are, respectively, the Indian counterparts of Shakespeare's Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca. Bhardwaj's choice of setting seems deliberate as Uttar Pradesh is "characterized by high levels of domestic violence and low levels of overall socioeconomic development and women's status" (Koenig 133). My thesis explores the ways in which the three female characters are fashioned in relation to the spatial constraints they experience in terms of the relationships shared with their male

counterparts. In doing so, I also consider some of the ways Bhardwaj blends the story of *Othello* with stories from Indian mythology (and the trope of Bollywood), suggesting some significant parallels shared by the patriarchal cultures of Shakespeare's day and those upheld by Indian mythology. I choose to focus on the universal and permanent thematic structures that Bhardwaj highlights through his amalgamation of *Othello* and stories from Indian mythology resulting in a unique product in *Omkaara*. Therefore, using Shakespeare's *Othello* and the stories of Sita and Durga as his evidence, Bhardwaj confirms that women like Dolly, Indu, and Billoo are at a disadvantage in marriage and, as the way they occupy various spaces further implies, they are therefore doomed to failure as individuals.

India is a country known for its traditional arranged marriages rather than chosen relationships. In such relationships an individual's worth, capabilities, and freedom of choice are brought to the fore by one's spouse, and marriage partners are not necessarily compelled to suppress or change their intrinsic characteristics, as in an arranged marriage regarded as a "settlement" not only between individuals but also families. Bhardwaj's film explores and questions such marriage norms and presents an array of possibilities through the film's characters and the relationships (marriage in particular) they share. The character of Dolly, like Desdemona before her, especially challenges those norms as she rebels against her father and society by running away from a marriage arranged for business purposes. In a nutshell, Dolly is a westernized, "college-educated" (Charry and Shahani 117) girl devoid of the rural accent shared by her love interest, the film's titular Omkara, who is a goon by profession, and Tyagi (derogatively nicknamed Langda which

means “cripple”), his brother-in-law and the scheming lieutenant who serves as Iago’s stand in.

At the same time, however, Dolly’s urban sophistication comes into question when she fails to possess a finesse for the English language as Kesu, Bhardwaj’s rendering of Cassio, aims to teach her to pronounce the word “bottom.” As English is considered to be the language of sophistication, possessing a satisfactory command over the English language is something that a majority of Indians aim for. Hence, Dolly’s lack of facility with the English language implies that she is stuck in a state of limbo between Westernization and Indianness even though she challenges the norms of traditional behaviour by running away from her own arranged marriage and eloping with Omkara. Although Dolly breaks the mold of a traditional Indian heroine by indulging in sexual relations before her marriage is solemnized, Charry and Shahani are right to argue that “she is in fact more traditional than many contemporary Hindi film heroines; she is, for instance, always in modest Indian clothing in keeping with her small-town background, and she works on her culinary skills because she believes in winning a man’s heart through his stomach. She is anxious to be the perfect wife” (118). Dolly is the demure woman who ends up being confined by the marital alliance she seeks. Representing prevalent Indian beliefs about women and marriage, *Omkara* offers a portrait of the deception and betrayal experienced by a young Indian girl by dint of male possessiveness and jealousy. The film’s use of space, both interior and exterior, is the visual manifestation of her emotional and psychic oppression.

Indu, on the other hand, seems to be content and comfortable within the dimensions of her marriage, perhaps more so than Shakespeare’s Emilia, whose

discontent in marriage prompts her theft of the infamous handkerchief. Bhardwaj's Indu is nevertheless exploited in a subtle manner. As Mike Heidenberg observes, "while most of the film's characters are clear analogues of the original characters, Bhardwaj radically reimagines the Emilia character to be a much more empowered and integral player in the film's action" (88). However, despite Bhardwaj's attempt to empower Indu, however, the social constraints produced by the location of the film create an impenetrably restrictive space in which even Bhardwaj fails to liberate Indu. Yet, because Indu is assigned a family-centric role as the wife of Tyagi and the sister of Omkara, she enjoys more authority than Emilia. Making Indu the sister of the titular male centres the film "on the idea of the family, with Indu herself as perhaps its central, if largely unacknowledged, member. In this central role, Indu is able to both subvert traditional patrilineal inheritance and act as avenger and protector of her family's honor" (Heidenberg 88). Despite being related to most of the characters in the movie, Indu fails to restore a semblance of familial camaraderie amongst the primary male characters. However, she is given the power to reimagine a failed society through the climactic scene by killing her husband, who represents a distorted system. Bhardwaj's Bollywood-inflected adaptation of *Othello* presents a reflection of Indian society through which he further elaborates the obsession that India has with marriage by entrusting the climax of his film in the hands of his married, female character. At the same time, Indu is effectively placed under strictures due to the place she occupies in her family and her marital status.

Finally, Billoo, the counterpart of Shakespeare's Bianca, who is described in Shakespeare's play as a "whore" (4.1.174) is, as Charry and Shahani point out, "never referred to as a prostitute (the actress Bipasha Basu who plays Billoo simply describes her



as ‘the hottie of the village’), but she is in some ways an updated and rewritten version of the ‘vamp’ figure who was a fixture in Hindi films” (119). Although Billoo has an independent career as a public performer, she is swayed by the presence of Kesu in her life. She overlooks his philandering ways and secretly harbours the desire to be his wife and share her life with him. Billoo is Bhardwaj’s attempt at showcasing an Indian girl who is independent in every way but still seeks a marital alliance to complete her existence. Through these three characters, I explore how marriage is portrayed as a confining space within which Bhardwaj’s female characters navigate different paths but ultimately fail in their own ways. That these women are even more constrained than Shakespeare’s is further implied in Bhardwaj’s interweaving of stories from Indian mythology with the plot of the original play to provide Dolly and Indu with a unique depth to their characters, drawing on *Othello* to create a uniquely Indian story in *Omkara*. The distinctly Indian inflection of Bhardwaj’s adaptation is further reinforced and explored in the points of conjunction between Billoo and the conventions of Indian cinema, especially Bollywood.

## CHAPTER 2: DOLLY

Dolly is mainly associated with two spaces, her father's house and the house she occupies with Omkara. It is telling that when Dolly opens the safety door to her father's house and grants entry to Omkara, she invites him not only into her domestic space but also into her personal and mental space. Like her Shakespearean counterpart, the Indian Desdemona crosses over from her father's house into the courtyard of her fiancé. Though Desdemona overcomes "doors locked" (1.1.84), Dolly is often seen lurking behind open doors, be it when she looks upon the injured Omkara or when she beckons Omkara to come and taste the *halwa* (Indian sweet dish) she has cooked. The expectations surrounding an impending marriage generate a stifling atmosphere that restricts Dolly not only physically but also emotionally and mentally. Dolly never appears completely at ease and seems to be suppressed under the burden of the relationships she shares with the men in her life, be it her father or Omkara.

In the first place, Bhardwaj chooses to depict his female protagonist in the private yet seemingly open space of an Indian rural kitchen, thus juxtaposing Dolly's domestic duties with her soaring spirit. Tellingly, there is a swing suspended in the kitchen, which becomes a symbol of the freedom she seeks. Her free-spirited nature seeks an outlet like the gap in the kitchen doorway. That Dolly is uncomfortable in confined spaces is further suggested by the frequency with which she is seen lurking behind doors. There is an air of anxiety that envelopes this demure character as she navigates her way through both her father's house at the start of the film and through Omkara's house for the remainder of the movie. However, Dolly's relationship with Omkara proves to be her most confining space. Besides being physically restrained within the walls of Omkara's

ancestral home, Dolly is also shown to be psychologically confined due to which she introspects and overthinks her every action. From here on the anticipation surrounding an imminent alliance helps create a suffocating environment that restricts Dolly physically, emotionally, and mentally.

Constrained she may be, but Dolly is a sentimental character who makes bold, emotional choices. At the start of the film, when in the private space of her bedroom, before her mirror, Dolly slips on the *kameez* (blouse) that is coloured in Omkara's blood while wearing the *mehndi* (henna tattoo) that is traditionally worn by a bride or a bride-to-be. This can be viewed as her choosing Omkara's blood, or even a potentially violent relationship with Omkara, over marriage to another man who is chosen for her. She looks at herself in the mirror while wearing the blood-stained *kameez* and breaks down, unable to come to terms with what is culturally and traditionally destined for her. The female protagonist of Bhardwaj's *Omkara* represents the Indian woman who may be at first defiant, but ends up subservient to the men in her life. She will eventually come to do as she is instructed and decides to smother her own will and volition. Dolly constantly takes on the role of the observer rather than the performer of action when she observes things happening from the periphery. In Dolly's case, as in Desdemona's, her biggest delinquency is that she goes against her father's desires by following those of her own heart. She is willing to sacrifice her own life if she is kept apart from Omkara. Contrary to what society expects of a rural, Indian woman, Dolly admits her love to Omkara and doing so becomes the initiator in the relationship. In the scene where Dolly is brought to the prison to give an account of what has transpired between her and Omkara, it is worth noting that as she stands outside the prison, she appears to be behind bars herself

(0:15:30). Here, the prison bars imply that Dolly, like Dedemona before her, is a rat being led unknowingly into a trap.

No matter what she says, the film indicates that Dolly is bound to disappoint one of the men in her life. Thus, whichever man she chooses, she is going to lose one of the relationships shared with one of the men who provide her with a certain amount of agency. She is asked to speak freely, without being affected by her audience, even as her father glares at her threateningly. As proposed by Sheila J. Nayar, “[In Bollywood,] even as India is authentically portrayed, heroes must still prove their moral mettle to millionaire in-laws, and daughters remain resigned to their fathers’ better judgment” (79). Hence, Dolly’s father’s betrayal in poisoning Omkara’s mind against her is an authentic portrayal in terms of the cultural setting employed. It may be, as Patrick Hogan observes, the norm “[i]n so many Indian films, [that] the departure of the bride from her paternal home is marked by sadness” (121). In Dolly’s case, however, the departure from her father’s house is not depicted, though she enters Omkara’s home amidst a festivity that seems unparalleled. For Dolly, there seems to be some level of comfort achieved by her transition from her father’s house to the house of the man she wants to marry. In the arrival scene, a marked distinction is made regarding the complexion difference that Omkara possesses in comparison with his fair bride. This distinction is highlighted through Indu’s words,

Not bad at all! May you be protected from all evil. Talk about a match made in heaven... like milk in a pot of coal... More like a candy in a crow’s mouth! ... Like sandal shining in the darkest night! ... Like a magic flute in the hands of the Dark Lord (Krishna). (0:36:52)

On some level, Bhardwaj specifically emphasizes the physical trait of skin color to throw light upon the internal characteristics of both Dolly and Omkara. Dolly's fair skin implies a pure and virginal being that becomes tainted by Omkara's carnal and dissolute existence. Their physical union represents the infiltration of a chaste body by one that has a jaded existence. Despite being from the same region, Dolly is treated differently because of her fair skin. As a Brahmin, the highest caste in Hinduism, Dolly is given elevated treatment due to her external appearance as well as status in society. However, the difference in the treatment meted out to Dolly isolates her instead of integrating her. Hence she is physically confined as well as mentally suppressed by the new home and the new relationships that accompany the forthcoming marriage.

As one of the most complex characters in *Omkara*, Dolly is doomed to prove her innocence in a way similar to the fate of Sita, the central female character of the *Ramayana*.<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to connect the *Ramayana*, *Othello*, and contemporary Indian life, Bhardwaj has Dolly undertake three "narrative prototypes" (Patrick Hogan 15). She plays the romantic lead by admitting her feelings for Omkara. Dolly dons the heroic cap when she confesses her love for Omkara in front of a male audience. And Dolly undertakes a sacrificial role by losing her life at the hands of the man she truly loves. Like Sita, Dolly is required to prove her innocence and overcome suppression. This is precisely the reference that Indu makes while trying to show Omkara the error he is committing in judging Dolly as unchaste. Indu explains, "When the scriptures themselves have sullied women, who can blame mere mortals like you brother? We renounce our homes and walk into your lives with bare empty hands. But even after the

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<sup>1</sup> The *Ramayana* is a founding Indian epic poem and a key allegorical text in Hinduism.

holy fires approve us, we're regarded disloyal sooner than loyal" (2:05:37). Indu thus underscores the punitive nature of Indian mythology and addresses the fact that each woman is dealt with as though she is born with fault. As the *Ramayana* elaborates,

Rama and Sita [fall] in love before their marriage is arranged. It then moves to the fixing of their marriages – in which, by a delightful coincidence, they are betrothed to one another. When Rama is exiled, Sita joins him. Unfortunately, she is kidnapped by Ravana (a demon) and held in his palace. Eventually, Rama defeats Ravana and rescues Sita. However, when Sita approaches him, he rejects her on the grounds that she has lived with another man. (Patrick Hogan 27)

There is a striking similarity in the way Dolly is labelled as unchaste by her husband on their wedding night, based simply on a suspicion vocalized by Tyagi. Like Dolly, Sita is suppressed merely on an assumption of infidelity. Omkara's accusatory queries lead the viewer to squirm. He asks Dolly, "Since when have you been warming Kesu's loins?" (2:15:22) – this comes across as a rhetorical question since Omkara is already convinced that Dolly is having an affair with Kesu. He further enquires, "Ok... at least tell me when was the first time you slept with him?" (2:15:31). Once again, the detail he seeks of an assumed affair is repulsive. Omkara, like Othello, has already adjudged his wife's guilt and is practising selective hearing and has already decided that "Thou art to die" (5.2.64). The intense interrogation adopted by Omkara further contributes to suppressing Dolly.

Omkara misuses the love and respect that Dolly bestows on him when he goes on to say, "Just for the record, are you carrying his baby by any chance?" (2:15:42). The

expression in Dolly's eyes at this stage in the film is one of horror and despair. Dolly is unable to fathom the source of Omkara's accusations and she fails to see what she is supposed to have done wrong. To top it all Omkara further speaks like an executioner when he says, "See, the deal is accept it, I'll spare you your life" (2:15:54). Here, Dolly is placed in the shoes of Sita who is unjustly accused despite being a faithful wife – "Thanks for the offer but you are free to take my life" (2:16:20). Just like Dolly, Sita was wrongfully accused and had to prove her innocence by physically passing through a fire. This phenomenon is known as *agnipariksha* which literally translates into "examination by fire." As per Indian mythology, the husband was elevated to the status of a god and in accordance with these norms, "Sita is widely considered the ideally chaste and ideally obedient Hindu wife who worships her husband as her god. In fact, her character is much more complex, as a number of writers have noted. Nonetheless, her popular image is one of entirely selfless devotion to her husband" (Patrick Hogan 27). Dolly, and for that matter even Desdemona, takes on the role of the guilty or unchaste wife, until she is proven innocent or chaste, in accordance with all that Sita undergoes in the *Ramayana*.

As has been noted, both *Omkara* and the *Ramayana* point in the direction of an insecure Indian patriarchal mentality and the fear of losing sole access to a woman's body. Somehow Shakespeare's insecure Othello translates effortlessly in terms of Indian cultural norms and results in a complete portrayal of the Indian male ego. Omkara's insecurity involving Dolly's friendship with Kesu highlights this patriarchal ideology of proprietorship. Indeed, in *Omkara*, "The harm wrought by patriarchal ideology that obsessively posits the need for male authorities to 'control' female sexuality—a theme implicit in 'Othello'—becomes more explicitly highlighted here, and is developed

through the later interactions of Dolly, her confidante Indu, and Omkara” (Indian Cinema). The guilt that an Indian woman suffers is something that is primarily culturally imposed and subsequently becomes an innate trait of her personality. Hence, we observe Dolly pondering over what she could have done wrong to incite Omkara’s anger and temper. Bhardwaj has effortlessly brought in the link between Shakespeare’s *Othello* and the *Ramayana* through his misunderstood and misjudged female protagonist who absorbs guilt for the behaviour of others towards her and confirms influences shared with Bollywood, where, as Nayar proposes, “characters are always larger than life, epic in size, if not downright superhuman. For this reason, they often are likened by critics to India’s mythological figures, the Ramas and Sitas, the Radhas and Krishnas” (37). Dolly comes across as a tried and tested Sita; however, Omkara fails to garner the respect that one would culturally owe to Rama. In *Omkara*, marriage and the connotation of proprietorship that is associated with it in an Indian context comes to the fore. The mindset of Indian women who are made to feel accountable to their male counterparts for the desires that they possess comes across as highly regressive. Dolly is physically and emotionally suppressed even before she becomes Omkara’s wife.

Dolly may function as a restricted character but there are a few other characters to whom she reveals her true personality. In Omkara’s presence she comes across as a trapped animal and is clearly dominated in the relationship. However, when with Kesu, whether it be when she gives him a letter to pass on to Omkara, or when she listens to his woes pertaining to Omkara, she clearly has the upper hand in the interactions. She is more at ease, visible through her smiling appearance, incessant banter, and subtle attempts at humor. Similarly, while in the company of Indu she may not be as cheerful



but she becomes vulnerable, which demonstrates a level of trust. It is worth noting that the only time she displays her vulnerability to Omkara is when she admits her love through the love letter. Dolly emphasizes, “I’ve always followed the tune of my heart” (0:16:01); even as she makes a culturally shocking revelation of love, however, Dolly’s pose is that of a trapped animal, with her eyes lowered, as she becomes the focus of male attention in the prison courtyard setting. Dolly represents the Indian woman who is made to feel guilty for her desires and begs forgiveness of her father for being in love with Omkara. Unlike Desdemona, who arguably displays extraordinary strength of character in the revelation scene by advocating her “divided duty” (1.3.209), Dolly demonstrates her vulnerability, and is reduced to tears by the male attention that she receives.

In the light of the bond of friendship shared by Dolly and Kesu, it is imperative to note that in Bollywood’s version of India, a friendship between a man and a woman is considered to be unattainable and inappropriate. The general idea propounded by Bollywood movies made until the decade when *Omkara* was released (28 July 2006) is that a heterogeneous friendship cannot exist. Emotional attachments, it is believed, lead to sexual desires which in turn lead to complicated relationships. In *Omkara*, this idea fits in the Indian as well as Shakespearean context. In parallel with Desdemona and the handkerchief seen to represent guilt, Dolly has to prove that she is innocent by presenting the waistband (*cumurbandh*) to her husband. Tyagi makes Omkara believe that the *cumurbandh* was given to Kesu by Dolly. Tyagi’s spark of suspicion is sufficient to create a downward spiral in Omkara’s and Dolly’s relationship, leading to Dolly’s suppression. Bhardwaj criticizes the mindset that a woman is an object to be possessed, as in commodity culture. Additionally, the *cumurbandh* functions as an object that each

of the primary characters desires to possess. Following the path of Othello's handkerchief, Omkara gives it to Dolly; Indu steals it from Dolly; Indu hands it over to Tyagi who in turn gives it to Kesu; Kesu finally gives it to Billo who drops it and the *cumurbandh* is finally retrieved by Tyagi and Omkara. In this process, Tyagi and Omkara symbolize the conventional Indian mindset that restricts women outside the bond of matrimony and suppresses their individuality.

The most significant of the film's material symbols may, however, be found in the climactic scene that offers one of the film's most fixating images – Dolly's murdered corpse swinging above Omkara's equally dead body. The swing's significance is built throughout the film as it is featured multiple times and serves as a place of intimacy between Omkara and Dolly. It is on the swing that he reveals his complex caste heritage to Dolly, thus making it a site of confession as well as one that promotes bonding between the two. In most *Othello* adaptations, the two characters are in contact after death, in accordance with the "tragic loading" (5.2.362) of the bed on which Shakespeare's main characters die. In *Omkara*, however, there is a deliberate and intriguing physical disconnection of the two main characters. On some level, the spatial disorientation is enhanced by a swing in motion. The separation through the use of the swing also has a pronounced effect in representing the disparity between the castes of the two characters. Dolly, who is a Brahmin, is elevated even in death while her half-caste husband languishes below her. Bringing the caste disparity to the fore in the last scene, Bhardwaj highlights the suppression experienced due to the insecurity that arises as a result of the caste system.

Furthermore, in describing the climactic scene in which Dolly and Omkara are found dead, Lalita Pandit Hogan elaborates that

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. 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. (51)

Simply put, Dolly knowingly enters a claustrophobic relationship but does so unaware of the fact that it would prove to be fatal. It is worth noting that both Dolly and Kesu are educated, in terms of Western qualifications. Bhardwaj makes educational equality a reason for seeking a romantic alliance by using Western education as the reason for Dolly being drawn to Kesu. Although there is no truth in this proposition, it is a logical basis for Omkara (who seems uneducated at least from the Western perspective) to feel insecure and jealous. The swing and the use of the English language function as symbols of mobility but still manage to transform into the site of ultimate restraint when the swing becomes Dolly's deathbed and the English language is perceived as a marker of class. In much the same manner, Dolly's relationship with Omkara is meant to be liberating as it gives her the freedom to forge emotional bonds; however, the relationship becomes a collection of constraints and detains Dolly emotionally, mentally, and physically. Like marriage, the swing and the English language function as means of suppression even though they are capable of granting some amount of agency.

Dolly becomes a subject of suspicion due to her inability to hold on to a material possession. She goes against the norms of rural India in writing to Omkara to reveal her love for him, and in using Kesu as her messenger, resists gender norms in favor of a modern and urban approach. In these and other ways, Dolly does not let herself be confined by social prejudices and familial expectations and dares to break free from the shackles of convention. In a way, as Lalita Hogan observes, “Bhardwaj’s *Omkara* is the story of a small town college girl who dared to choose!” (50). However, that being said, there is a drastic change in the portrayal of her character once she enters Omkara’s home. The feisty, quick thinking Dolly becomes subservient to her husband-to-be. She is extremely apologetic while dealing with Omkara in the scene where he questions her about the waistband.

As Patrick Hogan explains, “jewelry was a woman’s own property. It served as security for her in times of disaster. When a woman gives up her jewelry in Indian film or literature, it is a great sacrifice on her part. It is also potentially a great humiliation for her husband, for it suggests that he cannot fulfill his obligation as a householder” (121). When Omkara is made to believe that Kesu is now in possession of his family heirloom, it is a humiliating realization. Omkara views Dolly’s betrayal not only as an emotional loss but also as a material loss. The fact that Dolly claims not to know where the *cumurbandh* is, is sacrilege when viewed from Omkara’s point of view. Here, the Indian woman comes under the microscope for being an object of inquiry due to her material possessions. A non-living object takes on an animated role when its retention and possession become the sole basis to judge the worth of a relationship. Hence, we see Dolly oppressed by her inability to maintain her possessions, thus suggesting that she is

incapable of controlling access to her body. Omkara uses a fickle reason, the loss of the *cumurbandh* to raise questions about Dolly's sexual fidelity.

In many ways, *Omkara* draws on the conventions of a regular Bollywood movie and is thus a cinematic representation of a traditional Indian mentality. Bhardwaj critiques the regular Bollywood tropes with irony and sarcasm. Conventionally, “[s]tandard Hindi films often include a sequence of playful romance – lovers running through fields, frolicking on hillsides, splashing water, and the like” (Patrick Hogan 141). Dolly participates in many arbitrary activities when in the presence of Omkara, be it chasing him around with a gun, crushing sugarcane or singing for him. Dolly possessing the gun, in the scene wherein she pursues Omkara, (1:14:22) represents a gender reversal since she is in possession of a phallic instrument. Dolly thus temporarily tries to reclaim the space she occupies by taking on a masculine demeanour, but ultimately fails due to a cultural indoctrination that she cannot resist. For this reason, Omkara becomes the centre of Dolly's universe, as she cooks for him or simply exists for him. In a way, her sole focus becomes Omkara's pleasure, be it physical or emotional. However, the bold sex scenes in *Omkara* do go against the socially accepted norms within which an Indian woman is supposed to conserve her sexuality before marriage. The fact that Dolly gives herself physically to Omkara before marriage speaks volumes, as it not only highlights her passions and emotions but also speaks of the trust and unconditional affection she possesses for Omkara. These emotions are visible as she rejoices like a child when on a swing, which reflects her naivety and unrealistic expectations. Thus, Bhardwaj portrays Dolly as unrealistic when she both tries to dominate Omkara with the gun as well as when she seeks escapism through the swing.

Hence the film's scene that takes place after the snake has been dropped in the auspicious *haldi* vessel is especially significant. Dolly is distraught after the supposedly bad omen manifests itself. Counselling and consoling Dolly, Indu is presented as the stable female character who makes her attempt at restoring a semblance of order in Dolly's chaotic world. At this juncture Dolly makes a shocking revelation not only to Indu, but to herself as well when she says, "This is not the same Omkara for whom I gave up home and hearth" (2:01:29). Indu's justification for marriage in this scene seems unconvincing when she proposes marriage as an antidote to loneliness. However, the practicality that Dolly adopts to approach her forthcoming marriage clashes against the delusional attitude that Indu tries to instill in her. Both Dolly and Indu are at a disadvantage in terms of the spaces they occupy in their relationships; however, the main difference is the approach they adopt in dealing with their respective realities.

### CHAPTER 3: INDU

*Omkara* can in many ways be read as a critique of the significance of marital status. Through Indu's character in particular, Bhardwaj cautiously points out the disparity between a woman's demeanor in her mother's house or *maika* and that in her husband's house or *sasural*. The confidence displayed by Indu can be contrasted against Dolly's hesitation, reluctance and insecurity. Indu is fully in control of her actions and the fact that, as Heidenberg explains, she is able to

make fun of her brother, the most powerful man in the village, and do so in public, emphasizes Indu's position of strength in both Omkara's family and the village. The village itself is key to Indu's freedom in this scene. Under *parda*, women must veil themselves and be largely silent in public. However ... when a married woman is in her native village, these rules are often relaxed. Dolly, Omkara's bride-to-be from the city, veils herself and says nothing in her new, unfamiliar village. Indu, by contrast, the favorite sister of the village's favorite son, expresses herself much more freely among people who have known her all her life. (93)

The disparity among the treatment of women based on their marital status highlights the restrictions that marriage brings with it in a rural setting.

Presenting this discrepancy, Bhardwaj satirizes the norms of rural, Indian marriages. Although Indu is proficient at all the housework she does, Bhardwaj seems also to criticize the role of the domestic Indian housewife by giving her menial tasks like drying out cow dung cakes, a chore which is conventionally undertaken by rural Indian

women. By showcasing this base activity, Bhardwaj attempts to draw our attention to the futility of the activities undertaken by rural Indian housewives. However, the scene in which Indu is doing so (1:06:58) can be read in the following manner – Indu, the married woman, is squatting and touching the trivial dung while Dolly, the unmarried but privileged higher caste woman, is savoring the movement of the swing and is in a happier mood. Kesu, the only man in this scene, is standing even though he is in the position of the seeker. Gender disparity and caste discrepancy are evident throughout this movie but are visually predominant in this scene. Although Indu’s marital status does succeed in elevating her position in society, the expectations surrounding her role as a married woman manage to stifle her personality.

Thus Shakespeare’s Emilia undergoes a series of mutations to become Bhardwaj’s Indu. Unlike Dolly, who seems uncomfortable in confined spaces, Indu occupies her domestic sphere with ease, be it in the kitchen or the bedroom. But unlike Emilia, who is killed by her husband Iago, “in the closing minutes of *Omkaara*, Tyagi is strangely let go unharmed from the scene of the crime by Omkara himself, only to have his throat boldly, and quite justly, cut by his wife Indu, who is next shown about to commit suicide. It is in these subtle, sure-handed, and locally meaningful variations on the basic plot of Shakespeare’s play” (Modenessi 10) that lies Bhardwaj’s genius. The fact that Bhardwaj chooses to deviate from the original text and have Indu perform this gruesome act in the doorway of Omkara’s courtyard is thought provoking. Indu enters the climactic scene from the portal that Tyagi seeks to escape from. Heidenberg, further, justifies Vishal Bhardwaj’s modifications in the following words:



Vishal Bhardwaj references, interrogates, and reimagines standard elements of Bollywood cinema, Hindu mythology, and the traditional culture of Uttar Pradesh to create in Indu not merely an Emilia analogue, but a fully realized and inherently Indian heroine. Bhardwaj deploys these traditions to open up options for female empowerment in the specific situations in which Indu finds herself. (88)

Although for the most part, Bhardwaj has stuck to the original plot of Shakespeare's *Othello*, the most significant change that he brings about is the climax, when Indu kills Tyagi. Through this deviation, Bhardwaj endows his Emilia with the capacity for vengeance. Indu diverges from the role of Emilia when she attempts to safeguard the space occupied by her family while having to sacrifice her husband. By this bold deed, Indu not only breaks free of the confining marital space she occupies but also restores a semblance of peace to her family.

Indu, who lives in a typical rural, domestic setting with her husband Tyagi, is portrayed as the squabbling wife who nevertheless enjoys her relationship with her husband. In terms of the set design, Bhardwaj utilizes many doors throughout the film. It is suggestive that Shakespeare himself includes the word "door" or "doors" nine times in *Othello*. A door is an entrance to a certain space and can be seen as an outlet or a means of confining a person or things. In terms of *Omkara*, the cordoning off of space has a profound effect in positioning the female characters within societal and spatial thresholds. Indu, who can be labelled as the most unrestricted of the three female characters, is given certain privileges but at the same time is burdened by responsibilities due to her marital status. She has to skillfully balance all the relationships that define her,

including mother, wife, sister, and friend. Indu has to take on the responsibility for the spaces she occupies in the various relationships and has to safeguard the interests of her loved ones.

Yet, as the only married woman among the three female characters, Indu enjoys certain social privileges. She is shown traversing the village streets confidently (1:56:19) and seems bolder in her own skin compared to Dolly and Billo. Indu is outspoken and can express her opinions to anyone, be it the main characters like Omkara, Dolly, and Kesu or a minor character. In a way, marriage grants Indu an authoritative status, and she exerts this authority in the manner in which she deals with other characters. Looking at this from a rural, Indian perspective, a woman is considered incomplete and incompetent until she is redeemed by the presence of a husband in her life. In modifying Indu's fate, Bhardwaj empowers her by bestowing her with one of the most significant deviations from the play's action.

Consequently, Indu's role helps strengthen the familial ties amongst the various characters, making *Omkara* more of a family drama with Indu in one of the most central roles. Dionne and Kapadia suggest that "In Indu, the proto-feminist ideas of Shakespeare's Emilia merge with postfeminist actions, creating a character operating within and rebelling against traditional female roles exemplified both in *Othello* itself and in modern north Indian society" (13). Bhardwaj attempts to bestow Indu with the agency to take charge of her own destiny whilst slashing the person who grants her a respectable position in society due to her marital status. However, her decision to take her own life by jumping in a well and committing suicide is choosing to become a corpse rather than a widow. Thus *Omkara* deviates from the trope of a large majority of

Bollywood movies, especially those made in the first decade of the new millennium, that have featured the damsel in distress rescued by the knight in shining armor. Indu may not be rescued by a knight, but her “act of vengeance” nevertheless “places her in the Bollywood cinematic tradition of female avengers” (Heidenberg 92). Although movies featuring such powerful women are few in number, the thought that goes into them resists the Bollywood norm, propounding instead that a woman can be her own knight in shining armor and can avenge herself as well as her loved ones.

Indu’s significance is underscored by the fact that she is given key scenes with all the primary characters, including Dolly, Omkara, Kesu, and Tyagi. Bhardwaj portrays her as the wise and knowledgeable married woman who has been toughened and made competent largely on the merit of her marital status. Hence, it is of poignant value that her resolution of the core conflict involves restoring a semblance of peace to the entire situation by getting rid of her husband. If only Bhardwaj had not backtracked his bold move by having Indu kill herself, taking on the mindset of women in rural India who consider themselves unworthy after the death of their husbands. Although keeping in mind the legal proceedings that would have resulted, there seems to be more than guilt involved in Indu’s decision of giving up her life. Perhaps Bhardwaj is trying to draw our attention to ancient practices like *sati*, in which the wife was forced to jump onto the burning pyre on which her dead husband was being cremated. Although Indu takes the climax of the film in her hands, she cannot break free of the social restrictions that marriage imposes, especially in a rural setting.

Furthermore, Indu is the only maternal character among all the principal characters, and her maternal instincts are apparent from the manner in which she

interacts with the other characters. When Kesu is dismissed as the General, it is Indu who consoles and cheers him up. Unlike her husband Tyagi, she does not have any twisted plot in her head nor does she have any ulterior motives. Her disposition to tend to those in need reveals her nurturing personality. She uses the same words to cheer both Kesu and Dolly at different points in the film. She says “That’s a rare smile in this weather” (1:04:32) when she attempts to cheer Kesu. Indu also feeds Kesu, another action that manifests her maternal, nurturing attitude. Tellingly, the character Indu eventually murders is the one with whom she shared no maternal bond.

In a later scene, when Dolly is in tears after being manhandled by Omkara, Indu demonstrates empathy in the way she deals with Dolly. Indu says, “I’ll take care of you” (1:47:06). Once again, her maternal instincts come to the fore through her words. She further reassures Dolly when she says, “I’ll be your pa, ma, bro, sis” (1:47:09). In other words, Indu will be a pillar of strength by taking on the role of a blood relative in Dolly’s new and alien home. She uses the same line that she uses while talking to Kesu to cheer Dolly – “That’s a rare smile in this weather” (1.48.17). The third instance where Indu’s maternal side is displayed is seen when she coaxes Dolly out of believing in superstitions. This is the point in the film where the eagle drops the snake into the ritualistic turmeric liquid (2:00:43). Like a mother figure, Indu is trying to comfort Dolly who is a bride-to-be already at her wit’s end. However, Indu’s justification and advice in this case seems typically conditioned when she tries to convince Dolly that having disputes with Omkara is normal: “Men and women have always had a pan and ladle equation. Alone, they stay miserable and together, they make one helluva racket!” (2:02:43). What Indu articulates is the conventional attitude toward marriage in India.

Couples choose to stay miserable together rather than lead a solitary life, and Indu prefers to advocate for marriage instead of viewing things from a practical mindset. Perhaps Indu's being confined in her own marriage is what makes her want to promote confinement to Dolly as well. Despite her maternal attitude, Indu fails to view the constricted space that she dwells in and encourages a similar internment to Dolly.

Additionally, Indu is one of the only characters to whom Omkara reveals his insecurities. Unlike *Othello*, Bhardwaj's film forges a sibling bond between Indu and Omkara. Omkara, who rarely lets his guard down, is vulnerable while conversing with Indu, and she again reveals her perceptive nature when she says, "You can lie to the whole world but I don't get fooled that easy. Your eyes give it away. Won't you share it with your own sister? What demons are you carrying around in your head?" (2:04:01). In reply to this, Omkara admits that: "Her father's voice keeps ringing in my ears all the time – She who can dupe her own father will never be anyone's to claim" (2:04:43). In these instances, Indu elicits the vulnerable side of all the characters through her conversations with them.

As he does with Dolly, Bhardwaj presents snippets of Indian mythology through Indu, who is portrayed as a version of Parvati, the wife of Siva and sister of Krishna. Besides portraying Indu as a conventional, rural, Indian married woman, "Bhardwaj also draws on figures from Hindu mythology, which is often the basis of many Bollywood plots and character types, to enable Indu to take on aspects of Parvati – wife of Siva and sister of Krishna. Parvati, in her darker manifestation of Durga, is a protector of families and slayer of demons" (Heidenberg 88). Bhardwaj entrusts his Emilia with restoring balance to a plot that seems to be darkened by the deeds of Tyagi and Omkara. Indu

slays her husband Tyagi for engaging in the demonic subterfuge that results in Dolly's death. Thus, through the climax of the film, Indu is transformed into "a metaphorical manifestation of a vengeful goddess who can, unlike Emilia, avenge the deaths of those she cares about. Positioning Indu as such a figure, Bhardwaj explores and exploits a limited space and special circumstance in which the female can act as protector of honor within the male-oriented code and line of succession" (Heidenberg 88). Indu restores structure to a situation that has been contorted by her husband and avenges the wrongs done to Dolly. Indu ends up rectifying Tyagi's mistakes and forfeits her life in the process. Indu further chooses to renounce the space that now exists due to the void created by her husband's demise.

In a number of ways, Indu can be seen as one of the most contradictory and diverse characters in *Omkaara*. As Heidenberg elaborates,

Bhardwaj thereby creates in Indu a female figure who is simultaneously modern in her subversion and assumption of (ostensibly) male roles and ultimately traditional in her defense of her family and her son's honor. His reimagining of Emilia also suggests the potential for alternative constructions of honor and reputation based on merit rather than on gender. In Indu, the proto-feminist ideas of Shakespeare's Emilia merge with postfeminist actions, creating a character operating within, rebelling against, and ultimately being responsible for upholding traditional female roles exemplified both in *Othello* itself and in most Hindi cinema. (89)

Indu exemplifies that it is not always the hero who has to reconstruct and renovate the social structure that has collapsed. A heroine (or a female protagonist) can be equally

efficient, especially in a society where chaos has been created by the male characters, and Indu thus “embodies Durga in both her nurturing, protective form and, at least temporarily, her militant, vengeful form. Further, Durga, when in one of her other manifestations, is both wife to Siva and sister to Krishna, much as Indu is wife to Langda and sister to Omkara” (Heidenberg 92). Bhardwaj has carefully crafted his Indu keeping in mind goddess Durga and Indu thus takes on the dual role of nurturer and avenger.

Through the last scene, in which Tyagi tries to restrict Indu from telling Omkara too much, Bhardwaj tries to satirize domestic violence. Omkara smothers his bride while Tyagi manhandles his wife displaying brutish, male strength. Perhaps the only reason that Kesu does not manhandle his woman is because Billo is still not his wife and he therefore possesses no authority whatsoever over her physical being. Bhardwaj once again highlights the points of confluence between *Othello* and Indian mythology resulting in the hybrid space of *Omkara*.

For the most part, Bhardwaj criticizes the role of an Indian wife through Indu, whose primary purpose is to provide pleasure to her husband. Within the marriage, Indu occupies the space of the provider while Tyagi enjoys the role of the one who needs to be appeased. Indu not only provides Tyagi with sexual pleasure but also gives him materialistic pleasure when she hands over the *cumurbandh* (waistband) to him. It is interesting that Indu asks Tyagi “What would you like for dinner?” (1:19:02), which indicates that she takes her role of provider very seriously. After satisfying her husband’s sexual hunger, she now looks to appease his appetite for food. Her stealing the *cumurbandh* is another crucial act as she is aware of its significance as a family heirloom, being Omkara’s sister. In order to modify *Othello* for an Indian, rural context,

Bhardwaj possibly saw it necessary to provide a blood relationship between Omkara and Indu. However, this modification does tamper with Indu's desire to please her husband at the cost of her brother's happiness.

Indu's primary loyalty to her husband highlights the priority that Indian society gives to marriage and the detachment that an Indian woman practices by choosing the good of her husband and his family over that of her birth family. Performing her dual role "as Omkara's sister as well as Langda's wife, Indu becomes the central figure binding Omkara and Langda by ties of blood as well as those of occupation" (Heidenberg 91). Indu gives her husband the *cumurbandh* and by doing so endangers her brother's marriage. Indu "challenges patrilineal inheritance" (Heidenberg 97) by taking away something that rightfully belongs to Dolly. In the absence of any material possessions, Indu seizes the *cumurbandh* in the hope of making it her own. Although she attempts to possess the *cumurbandh*, "Even her theft does not make the cumurbund [sic] truly belong to her, however, as she is duty bound as a traditional wife to give it to her husband, which she promptly does" (Heidenberg 98). As a traditional, rural, Indian wife, Indu has no proprietorship over materialistic wealth, and all that she possesses is her husband's. Family heirlooms are no longer hers after marriage and although Indu is entitled to an elevated position in society on the grounds of being Tyagi's wife, her marital status restricts her capacity to possess material wealth.

Lastly, all things considered, there is an air of authority in Indu's tone when she addresses most of the other characters. She exudes a confident and definitive ethos along with composed body movements. Her voice as well as movements are a reflection of the secure position she enjoys by virtue of being a married woman. Unlike Indu, both Dolly



and Billoo are unmarried and hence portrayed as insecure. As per Indian conventions, a single woman needs to be reserved and restrained. *Omkara* is thus ahead of its times in portraying both Dolly and Billoo as sexually unrestrained and independent women. Dolly has a live-in relationship with her husband-to-be, while Billoo is bold and uninhibited by virtue of her profession, making both characters unconventional. On the contrary, Indu is stereotypical. What makes Indu slightly unorthodox is the tone with which she addresses her husband. She constantly uses sarcasm and ridicule while addressing him. Ironically, however, unlike Dolly and Billoo, Indu “lacks a singing voice, dubbed or otherwise. Indu appears to exist outside the aural and representational mix typical of Bollywood musical numbers” (Heidenberg 90). While Dolly learns to sing for *Omkara*, Billoo dances and sings in front of a male audience on two occasions, but Indu dances only as a part of the marriage festivities and in front of a gathering of women. Indu lacks the freedom of speech (or voice) that both the unmarried female characters possess. Her creative attributes are restricted. Furthermore, as a rural, Indian wife, Indu is forcibly placed under restrictions involving modesty by virtue of her gender and marital status. As a result, she has to modify her behaviour and actions to occupy the space of a traditional Indian housewife.

## CHAPTER 4: BILLOO

Although Billoo is Bhardwaj's attempt at portraying an independent Indian village girl, her gullibility when dealing with situations and people connected to Kesu displays a typical reliance and overdependence on a man. The main factor that distinguishes Billoo from Dolly and Indu is that she lives by herself and does not need to co-habitate to survive. As the film progresses, however, it is brought to our notice that Billoo craves the familiarity and comfort of a heterosexual relationship that would arise with a secure marriage. In other words, Billoo is Bhardwaj's successful attempt at portraying a woman who may not be spatially confined, but is nevertheless restricted by the social emphasis given to marriage.

To begin with, Billoo possesses antithetical personality traits, wherein her external appearance and her public persona are at loggerheads with how she acts and reacts in her personal life, much like Bollywood movies that present a duality between fantasy and reality. In most scenes, Billoo is shown to be extremely bold and confident as she performs in the public space of the village stage. But her audacious public persona as a confident and alluring singer and dancer is replaced by a vulnerable personality when in the presence of Kesu or in the process of locating him. Although Billoo is not physically confined by the village in general or the performance stage in particular, she is restrained by the mindset against her profession. Unlike Shakespeare's Bianca, who assumes a peripheral role in *Othello*, Billoo occupies a significant amount of screen time in *Omkaara*. Interestingly, Billoo is shown indulging in domestic activities like the drying of her washed clothes in the scene where she has a telephone conversation that leads her to believe Kesu is having an affair (1:59:28). Presenting her engaged in the most basic of

activities like household chores, Bhardwaj shows his audience the most vulnerable side of his bold Billoo, thus making her more multi-faceted and therefore more realistic. The hurt and betrayal she experiences is evident in her words “Who’s there with him?” (1:59:31). Billoo’s face is semi-covered by her drying clothes, revealing one eye and the pain inflicted by the isolation she experiences. Her bold and brazen external appearance fails to conceal her vulnerable and malleable interiority. Through the information that she has obtained, Billoo feels both cheated and neglected by the man whom she desires to marry. Even though Billoo possesses physical freedom, she lets herself be held captive by her countless emotional insecurities and hence comes across as highly confined.

Consequently, Bhardwaj brings about an intentional shift from Billoo’s public image to her private perception. Keeping in mind the Indian context, Bhardwaj tones down Billoo’s alluring and enchanting public image to take on the role of a demure and subservient Indian girl who is skilled in domestic activities and is a homemaker in the making to be able to be worthy of being a wife. Despite her independent personality, Billoo fits into the bracket of an unrealistic, emotional girl who lets her mind be ruled by the man whom she loves. Her emotions and passions override logic and practicality, and she behaves foolishly when it comes to any matter involving Kesu. Keeping in mind that this movie is a representation of rural, North Indian society, the highly reliant nature of rural Indian women comes to the fore. Billoo is Bhardwaj’s statement against a highly patriarchal, rural society and he provides her with plenty of personal space and reveals the manner in which she squanders it due to societal conventions.

On the whole, Billoo can also be seen as a personification of Bollywood to the extent that she stays confined within her creative space despite wanting to be path-

breaking and revolutionary. Although Bollywood, in general, is characterized by colorful dance numbers, the songs in *Omkara* are a little different and Billoo's public performances are a significant part of the plot and cannot be seen as mere interludes. In terms of correlation between song and dance numbers and Shakespearean soliloquies, Patrick Hogan elaborates the following:

[T]he song and dance interludes may appear obtrusive. In other formalizations, the elaboration may be more limited, thus easier to ignore. But that does not seem to be the whole problem. Shakespeare's soliloquies are shorter than song and dance interludes. But they certainly seem long enough – and mimetically implausible enough – to prompt questioning. This brings us to a further, crucial characteristic of the interlude – its narratively ambiguous status. (163)

There are two songs featuring Billoo, and both songs are narratively significant. In the first song entitled *Beedi Jalayle* (Light your 'fags' – cigarettes), Tyagi gets Kesu drunk and Rajju causes a disruption involving Billoo. That is to say, the context of the song follows the plot of *Othello*. A momentous amount of the plot is revealed during the course of the song. Billoo seems unnecessarily dependent on Kesu restoring order, when she herself could have asked Rajju to stop smoking as the fumes were bothering her. Instead of taking responsibility for her personal space, Billoo chooses to give that authority to Kesu.

Similarly, Billoo's second song, known as *Namak Ishq Ka* ("The Spice of Your Love"), is a setting to capture a goon who is opposed to Omkara and his gang. Bhardwaj efficiently brings out this contradiction in the way Billoo lets herself be used as a trap

and, in doing so, attempts to restore harmony between her man, Kesu, and his boss, Omkara. Here, Billoo uses her physicality as a device to detain drunken men at the behest of Kesu. She fails to respect the parameters of her personal space, which leads to her betrayal and downfall. She dons the mask of a confident woman while performing in order to redeem Kesu's status, but at the same time is unable to express her insecurity when told that Kesu is behind locked doors with another woman. Bhardwaj has strategically placed his Billoo within the role of a professional dancer and singer who technically commands a creative space: - at the same time, public performers are considered to be morally inferior due to the nature of a profession that requires them to display themselves in a public space for the entertainment of others. Thus Billoo once again comes across as a physical representation of Bollywood, where creativity and substance are constantly opposed to one another.

It is worth noting that, even though *Omkara* is in many ways a Bollywood film, there is a purpose and a pattern to every music piece within it. Generally, in Bollywood, certain characters or events are associated with a specific dance or music number. Hence, we have Billoo associated with extremely sensual dance moves accompanied by raunchy lyrics that cast her in the mold of an extremely sensual and flirtatious personality. The song-and-dance feature has long been an integral part of popular, Indian cinema. Further, Sangita Gopal explains that "the performance sequence range from the culturalist to the sociological and techno-industrial, though no single approach may be fully capable of explaining this enduring phenomenon" (24). In *Omkara*, Billoo's songs can be viewed as culturalist as they represent the tradition of folk dancers or women entertainers in a rural

setting. Being an entertainer, Billoo, like Bollywood, propagates the notion of marriage as ultimate goal of achievement for a woman.

Additionally, the songs involving Billoo are what Patrick Hogan describes as diegetic and which “occur in the story” (163). The other songs in *Omkara* are examples of nondiegetic music that “is heard by the viewer, but does not occur in the story” (163). There are no nondiegetic songs in which Billoo is featured throughout this two and half hour movie, suggesting something about how the conventions of Bollywood aesthetics and industrial practices are shifting. This departure from convention can also be read as Bhardwaj’s placement of Billoo within a real frame rather than one of fantasy, making her a performer rather than a dreamer. Despite these precautions, Billoo comes across as someone who casts aside practicality to embrace the illusion of marriage to a man who lures her with consideration and care, thus shattering her shield of independence and self-reliance.

Comparatively, unlike *Othello*, the romantic relationships in *Omkara* are well defined. Although the relationship between Indu and Tyagi is a spousal one, there seems to be a lack of emotional intimacy in their interactions. The liaisons between Dolly and Omkara and between Billoo and Kesu seem more passionate. Unlike the play, “The film has not one but two principal romances, with the relationship between Kesu and Billo [sic] Chamanbahar being much more sincere than the relationship between Cassio and Bianca, their analogues from *Othello*. There are several songs and dances, most notably as performed by Billo [sic], who is the town’s resident flirt and performer” (Heidenberg 91). Although Bhardwaj bestows Billoo with a love story, she too is neglected and bad-mouthed by her lover in much the same way as Shakespeare’s Bianca. Despite sincerely

giving of herself, she is left with nothing but betrayal and is ill-treated within the space of the relationship she shares with Kesu.

In addition, the three women, Dolly, Indu, and Billoo are extremely emotional, sensitive, and sensual. As Lalita Pandit Hogan specifies that “[a]t the level of emotion, the contrast between what Billoo configures and what Dolly configures is nowhere more evident than in the visceral sexuality of Billoo’s [sic] 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” (50). While Dolly’s method of expression is meditative and internal, Billoo’s is dramatic and forceful. As a result, Billoo can be viewed as a personification of Bollywood that renders her vibrant and full of life. Although Billoo is emotional in her own way, she keeps her head firmly on her shoulders. She is, however, impulsive, which makes her different from Dolly and Indu, in that she does not hesitate to confront her man, Kesu. Billoo represents those Bollywood movies that intend to be hard hitting by dealing with substantial issues, but ultimately fail due to commercial demands and audience expectations.

Equally important is Bhardwaj’s presentation of a dichotomy in Billoo that renders her simultaneously Western and modern whilst being Indian and traditional. As elaborated by Charry and Shahani,

Billo [sic] is clearly not traditional in her bold sexuality and suggestive dance moves; she starts to sing a traditional Indian ghazal and switches to a raunchy number sung to Indo-Western beats. But she is also very Indian: the earthy, dusky-skinned femme fatale of the small town. Self-

consciously and defiantly gaudy, outrageous, loud, cocky, sexy, young, unsure of herself but also very self-assured, and very, very certain of the adulation of her audience, Billo [sic] exemplifies the spirit of performance and the spirit of modern Indian cinema itself. She appears to be indifferent to social disapproval, and has made a place for herself – precarious as it might seem – in the town dominated by tradition. (119)

Billoo represents the controversial aspects of Bollywood that are disdained by a large section of Indian society on the grounds that the genre is extremely fantastical and does not contribute to the wellbeing of society. What needs to be clarified to critics of Bollywood, however, is the fact that the fanciful stories that are churned out by this film industry provide a sense of temporary relief from the mundane. As specified by Ashis Nandy, “on an average day, India releases more than two-and-a-half feature films” (1). The plethora of movies released provides a whimsical window on the harsh realities that envelope most Indians. Like Billoo, Bollywood is “indifferent to social disapproval” and is confident of the appeal that it exudes irrespective of what others think. Much like Billoo, Bollywood also offers a perfect blend of Western practices and Indian principles.

In the same way, Billoo’s existence reflects the film that she is a part of. Billoo represents the earthiness of *Omkara* while partaking of its outlandish elements. On some level, Billoo’s brash personality is representative of the film’s tumultuous space. Billoo is at once charming and coarse, vulnerable and powerful. As Charry and Shahani point out, “Of all characters, she is the symbolic projection of the film’s awareness not only of its own status as Shakespearean adaptation, but quite simply as work of art and entertainment” (119). Through Billoo, Bhardwaj tries to convey the lack of complete



translation of a Shakespearean character into a rural, North Indian setting. Furthermore, Billoo recognizes her purpose to entertain and delight her audience just as Bhardwaj intends to do through *Omkara* which failed to be a commercial success because of its unconventional approach to the conventions of Bollywood. *Omkara* attempts to break the fantastical Bollywood mode by failing to imagine any kind of freedom for its women, which in turn reinforces oppressive real-world social structures, particularly in rural north India. That being said, however, “The only space the film can be read as affirming is itself – Hindi cinema as performative space, which bears the burden and meaning of modern ‘Indianness,’ the means through which a vibrant, confident cultural identity can come into being” (Charry and Shahani 120). *Omkara* is a manifestation of the earthiness and base nature of rural, Indian society. The manner in which the female characters are dealt with, be it the conventions and restrictions surrounding them or the attitude adopted by their male counterparts towards them, is a delicate space that needs to be entered carefully. In addition, if we look at Billoo as a projection of the film, she is visually appealing while being wrought with flaws. As Charry and Shahani substantiate, “this arena of cultural performance, the film indicates, is all there is for now, and it is to this that the postcolonial film will turn as it takes up, in its own way takes on, and perhaps even takes over Shakespeare” (120). Like *Omkara*, Billoo becomes culturally unacceptable for her radical shift from culturally accepted norms. And, like Bollywood, Billoo will need to undergo a transformation to obtain the approval of both Indian and international society.

For the most part, Bhardwaj presents Billoo as a sex symbol because that is how the men in a rural Indian village would see her. The lechery and lust with which Billoo is

looked upon presents the horrid side of rural, Indian society where crimes like rape are rampant.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, “The availability of foreign pornographic films intensifies the construction of women as existing for men’s pleasure” (Derne 41). On some level, Billoo is aware that her existence is associated with male pleasure. In the scene where Kesu is trying to lure her into trapping the goons who are opposed to Omkara, Billoo spells it out with her words, “It’s time to call it a night yet you’re not dragging me to bed” (1:31:22). Billoo sees herself as a physical body that provides a man with sexual pleasure. This is an instance where Billoo displays her practical side. Billoo’s practicality prevents her from taking a leap of faith and visualizing a marital future for herself. In Kesu’s case, Billoo ends up being sensible by not falling for his marriage proposals. She asks Kesu outright, “At least now, tell me what your scheme is?” (1:33:18). Billoo chooses to dwell within a space of practicality even when surrounded by an ambience of violent fantasy.

Even after knowing that she is being used by Kesu, however, Billoo allows the relationship to proceed. Her independence and self-reliance are drastically affected by her emotional attachment to him. Further, Bhardwaj gives Tyagi, Kesu and many subsidiary characters crass dialogue to showcase the mentality of the rural, Indian male. Women are perceived as sex objects and Billoo offers a visual representation of what men in such a rural setting might desire. As further elaborated by Steve Derne, “Global media’s *intensified* celebration of male violence and construction of women as existing for men’s pleasure is accepted because it reinforces ways that local popular culture supports male dominance” (41). Bhardwaj highlights Billoo’s overdependence on Kesu

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<sup>2</sup> As per a report consolidated by the *American Economic Journal* in October 2012, there has been a 23% increase in rapes of rural Indian women over the last decade.

and the pleasure he seeks, which hampers her self-reliance. Outside the institution of marriage, the relationship between Billoo and Kesu is doomed to failure due to inability to recognize her self-worth and her emotional fluctuations that are a response to Kesu's actions. Billoo becomes the source of Kesu's pleasure and as a result *Omkara* becomes a representation of patriarchal Indian society. Marriage or the desire to be married becomes the force that showcases the flaws of the patriarchal mentality still predominant in rural Indian settings.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

*Omkara* is a film that draws on the story of *Othello* to explore themes of suppression and vengeance from Indian mythology, invoking the allure of Bollywood to present a picture of patriarchy confirming that, for women in rural India, marriage is a space of confinement. Through the relationships shared by the three couples in *Omkara*, Bhardwaj depicts a range of possibilities as the outcomes of marriages in a patriarchal society. Dolly and Omkara go against convention and share a live-in relationship that culminates in a marriage that sees Omkara murder his wife on their wedding night. Indu and Tyagi share a typical Indian marital relationship in which the relationship is dominated by the man; ironically, Indu kills her husband in an attempt to restore order to a chaotic and destructive system. Billoo and Kesu, who do not enter the dimensions of a marriage, are the only couple that come away alive and with the possibility of sharing a relationship beyond the frame of the movie. This indicates that they are outside the confining space of a marital relationship and hence possess more agency. In *Omkara*, it is telling that there are differences in the demeanour as well as the ways in which Dolly, Billoo, and Indu occupy their spaces when in the company of their lovers, Omkara, Kesu, and Tyagi. Dolly is liberated when not in the presence of Omkara; Indu is redeemed when she functions outside the bounds of Tyagi's influence; and Billoo is self-sufficient till the time that Kesu does not feature in her life. The film and Bhardwaj suggest that co-habitation of their spaces is detrimental to the female characters. As with the original *Othello*, marriage in Bhardwaj's film proves to be the crucible that tests the limits of a patriarchal society and leads to the confinement of the female characters.

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