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**LOVE, BETRAYAL AND VIOLENCE:
A FEMALE SUBJUGATION IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAY OTHELLO**

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Abstract:

Women across historical, social and religious boundaries have been pitted against the asphyxiating patriarchal norms and rigid cultural constructs which bestow power, dominance and freedom on man, and push her into the margins of both, society and domestic space. The current paper attempts to explore the mechanics of domestic violence, and its treatment in William Shakespeare's *Othello*. The aim is to ascertain how the playwright addresses the issue of crime against women within the familial and social world of his times. Based on the theme of power politics within domestic hierarchy, the play not only lays bare a grim picture of domestic abuse and violence against women in matrimony, but also offers an insight into the psyche of abusers. The dialectics of power struggle in the play written in the 16th century is a reflection of the playwright's sensitivity towards the existential reality of women of his times and his negation of male hegemony and criminal violence in conjugal relations. . Vishal Bhardwaj adopted *Othello* to make the film *Omkara* in 2006. Bringing the 17th century Elizabethan society in the 21st century Indian setting, Bhardwaj deftly pointed out the present scenario. There are numerous cases of a father's restriction on daughter's freedom of choice, brother's threat to the sister for not to disgrace their family apart from 'honour killing'. This continues even in the household of her 'soul mate' for whom she dares to defy every challenge. The predicament of modern Desdemona's in the hand of Othello bears the testimony of Shakespeare's immortal creation and its never ending relevance. The universality of Shakespeare is still rejoiced due to his experiment on the core region of the human psyche which fails to alter even with high-tech service or 'progressive' education.

Key Word: power politics, violence matrimony, domestic heirarchy, male hegemony.

William Shakespeare is one such literary artist whose plays have enshrined the timeless realities of human situation. Being a social critic, he captured the harsh actualities of life

entangled in the intricacies of human psyche raising pertinent and disturbing questions on the issues which perturbed his sense of morality, justice and propriety. Shakespeare was keenly aware of the fact that in the long odyssey of human evolution marked by varied socio-cultural, political and economic developments, the status of women has largely been secondary to man's. They have been condemned by the inflexible patriarchal social strictures into tacit servility, forced obedience and unwarranted violence, both within the domestic environs and without. This phenomenon has existed ubiquitously across temporal, geographical, cultural and linguistic boundaries. Shakespeare's own consciousness of the seamier side of man-woman relationship reflected in brutal acts of violence, rape, physical and verbal abuse, mutilation and killing in the name of honour, finds a vivid expression in his plays such as *Othello*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Taming of the Shrew* and even *Hamlet*. This paper is a comparative attempt to the analysis between Desdemona and Dolly in the pages of East and West against the 17th and 21st-century time zone. Based on the theme of power politics within domestic hierarchy, this play lays bare a grim picture of nuptial discord, subjugation of women and violence within matrimony inflicted by suffocating patriarchal norms of the 16th century England.

Shakespeare's sensitivity towards the issues of crimes against women, gender inequity and marital violence finds an eloquent expression in his most well-known domestic tragedy *Othello* - a horrifying tale of a husband's unfounded jealousy culminating in the brutal murder of his innocent wife. The play dramatizes the tragic end of a unique inter-racial love story between a beautiful, pious and accomplished noblewoman, and a valiant, noble and much venerated Black warrior. Fascinated by the glorious achievements of this Moor who had a vagabond, adventurous and perilous past; Desdemona defies all socio-cultural and familial restrictions to woo him, and finally elopes with him to wed him. As a devoted wife she is eager to compensate him for all the warmth, love and care he has missed in his early life. Though both exhibit a natural understanding and mutual regard, their compatibility is put to test by Othello's blind faith in Iago, his diabolical subordinate. Using Desdemona as a pawn to avenge his ignominious rejection for the post of Othello's deputy, the villain poisons his master's mind against her character by painting it in sordid colours. Victoria Time in her book *Shakespeare's Criminals: Criminology, Fiction and Drama* asserts: "In a society of male dominance, Iago can only properly redress the slight by Othello of not according him the position of Lieutenant through ridiculing Othello's wife's morality". (Time 84). Blinded by interminable

jealousy, Othello's injured male ego exercises its masculine hegemony by abusing her, hitting her and finally killing her in the name of honour without giving her any chance to defend herself. Denied any chance of explanation, she has no option but to submit helplessly to the atrocities of her tyrant husband armed with the twin ferocities of darkness – falsehood and evil. The play however, ends with the revelation of her innocence truth resulting in Iago's capture and Othello's suicide. Vishal Bhardwaj in his film *Omkara* also brings to us this power game of man-women relationship and its shocking consequences barring the boundaries of time, zone, culture or society. It aims to highlight this unending saga of violence on women, 'the guardian of morality', and 'Othello syndrome' in the classroom of Bollywood.

The character of Desdemona has long been discussed throughout the time and ages. Sometimes she has been portrayed as a victim or sometimes a simple sacrifice in the patriarchal world in the name of 'honour'. When the universal essence of Shakespeare adopted in Bollywood screen, it becomes more intriguingly interesting due to the 'desi' flavour of his work. Here the 'moor' is replaced with the 'don' in 21st-century background in a remote village of Uttar Pradesh. The insecurity due to the supposed 'loose morality' of a beautiful and fair wife is not a problem of Shakespeare's time only. Vishal Bhardwaj's directed film *Omkara* (2006) which is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* brings together the West and the East, the 17th century and the modern to be infused in the same tune with a difference of settings only. The predicament of women as a simple victim or target is kept on playing till this time. What Desdemona, Lavina, Lucrece suffered once can be very much witnessed in the lives of Rupa, Laxmi or Nirbhaya.

The film *Omkara* has been set against the ethnicity and the cultural trope of India. Instead of a war zone, it is set in a political scenario with a typical Brahmin leader, Bhaishaab (Naseeruddin Shah- Duke of Venice), his 'Bahubali' Omkara 'Omi' Shukla (Ajay Devgan- Othello) along with his other followers like Ishwar Landga Tyagi (Saif Ali Khan- Iago) and Keshav 'Kesu Firangi' Upadhyaya (Vivek Oberoi) in the remote area of Uttar Pradesh. Here the lawyer, Ragunath Mishra's (Kamal Tiwari – Brabantio) daughter Dolly (Kareena Kapoor- Desdemona) falls in love with Omkara. The movie starts with Tyagi's warning to Rajju (Deepak Dobriyal- Roderigo) to save his bride as she is going to be kidnapped by Omi. As Desdemona eloped with Othello, Iago goes on to inform her father how he is deceived:

Zounds, sir, you're robb'd; for shame, put on
your gown;
Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul;

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
 Is topping your white ewe. Arise, arise;
 Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,
 Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you: (Iago-Act-1, Scene 1).

His comparison of Othello with 'black ram' and Desdemona with 'white ewe' shows his severe contempt against such pair of lovers, which was then totally unacceptable in the society. When Brabantio goes to the duke to complain against Othello's dare to abduct her daughter, Desdemona is asked if she is forced to be with the moor. She gently says:

My noble father,
 I do perceive here a divided duty:
 To you I am bound for life and education...
 How to respect you; you are the lord of duty;
 I am hitherto your daughter: but here's my husband,
 And so much duty as my mother show'd
 To you, preferring you before her father,
 So much I challenge that I may profess
 Due to the Moor my lord. (Desdemona - Act 1, Scene 3).

The 'fair and gentle' Desdemona from the so-called Aristocrat family confesses her love for the moor. She defies her father's challenge that she can never 'fall in love with what she fear'd to look on!' Desdemona not only dares to love the moor but also wants to be with her husband even in the middle of a war zone. Here in the film, we find in the 21st century setting a political leader Bhaisaab is solving the matter with Omkara and Raghunath. Dolly is also grown up in a remote village of Uttar Pradesh, but never judge the 'gunday' and 'half-caste' Omkara by any prejudice as she is the servant of her own choice. She treats him just like any other man and even decides to commit suicide if she does not get Omi's love. She confesses her love to the man of her dream:

'Apne Dil ki Chaukhat ulangh ke, ham Omkara ke dahliz ki dasi ban gaye the...raat din Omkara ke aag main gal rahe the hum' (When I open the entrance of my mind, I become Omkara's servant. I was melting day and night in the burning passion of Omkara).

A woman who is so full of passion and love for a fellow human being and ready to worship the moor as the God of her love, she does not get the support even from her father. He is

more concerned about his class and colour. He loved Othello once and invited often but when it come in terms to his daughter he simply call him 'tyrant' and even warns him:

Look to her, Moor; have a quick eye to see.

She has deceiv'd her father; may do thee!

—(Brabantio, Act 1, Scene 3)

Thus, at the very beginning of the play the angry and vengeful father of Desdemona gives the unjustified cue about the woman's character. These very words keep on ringing in Othello's or Omkara's mind throughout the rest of the play before he convinces himself of "Frailty, thy name is woman". He burns the all sacrificing love of his beloved in the coiling fire of jealousy.

Unlike Othello, Omkara is not alone here. He is given a full family with the neighbour too. Here Indu (Konkona Sen Sharma), unlike Emilia, is not a servant but the very affectionate sister of Omi and friend of Dolly. When Dolly comes to this not-so-aristocrat family of Omkara in the remote village, she makes no complaint regarding their low status and rather enjoyed her very welcome. Here Desdemona in the form of Dolly was constructed in the flavour of an Indian housewife who is excellent in cooking 'Halwa' as she believes her grandmother's words, 'Admi ke dil ka rasta admi ka peth se khulta hain' (A man's door of heart opens if he has a good meal). She tries all her best to make Omkara happy whether by cooking tasty dishes or learning English love song. She even ignores Omi's caste as half – Brahmin as his mother was not Brahmin. She consoles the suffering beloved: "Chand jab adha ho jave, to chand hi kahilave" (If the moon is broken in half, it will be called the moon only). He too loves his beautiful wife but with a difference. Whereas Desdemona thinks Othello as her partner of love and trust, Othello takes her as a possession and a conquered trophy and therefore suffers from the doubt of losing that precious thing. His feeling of insecurity is not overcome by the immense love of his beloved. Iago, who is angry over Othello's choice of Cassio as a lieutenant over him, took no time to notice this and therefore plans the destruction of the moor's all happiness and dreams. The first thought comes to Iago's mind is to exploit Othello's insecurity against his beautiful and fair wife. Iago strongly believes that in this patriarchal society women are nothing but possession. They can be used, exploited to fulfil men's wishes. At one point one of the antagonists in *Omkara*, Surendra Kaptaan challenges that Omkara will never marry Dolly but leave only after seducing and beating her. Though Omkara protested it by beating and killing Surendra, he does not remain

true to his feelings for a long time. Soon he is caught in the conspiracy of Iago who says superficially:

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy;
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on; that cuckold lives in bliss
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;
But, O, what damned minutes tells he o'er
Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves! (Iago- Act 3, Scene 3)

Othello keeps on entangling himself in the poison of jealousy without judging the right or wrong until it's too late.

Desdemona dares to defy her bondage. But whom she can trust? Even her very own people- her father, her husband put question on her character if she dares to go beyond the prison of male's possession. The very valour and temperament of Othello as a warrior that moves Desdemona to fall in love with him fails as a husband who went to the extent of killing his better half with the slightest provocation. Here comes the universality of Shakespeare when Vishal Bharadwaj adopts "*Othello* as *Omkara* against the settings of 21st century 'modern life'. Does the situation change now? Let us look in the life of Omi. Omi loves Dolly his best and was ready to give his all to her. But when a slight reason of doubt appears he didn't even bother to make it clear from his once trustworthy, the loving soul mate Dolly but convinced himself of her affair with Kesu. He goes even to hit her when she didn't find the 'kamarbandh' which he takes as the only proof of her love for him and even goes on accuses her as a whore." (Times:84)
At the end when Desdemona denies all the charges against her chastity, Othello pays no heed to it as he already turns to 'green-eyed' monster :

OTHELLO

Out, strumpet! weep'st thou for him to my face?

DESDEMONA

O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!

OTHELLO

Down, strumpet!

DESDEMONA

Kill me to-morrow: let me live to-night!

OTHELLO

Nay, if you strive--

DESDEMONA

But half an hour!

OTHELLO

Being done, there is no pause.

DESDEMONA

But while I say one prayer!

OTHELLO

It is too late.

He stifles her (Act- 5, Scene- 2)

Emilia appears to be one of the strongest characters in the play as I have mentioned before. She is more than just a tool used by her husband. But here in the film, unlike the maid Emilia, Indu appears as a close one to both Omkara and Dolly. She teases Omi - his pair with Dolly like 'koyle ke lote mein dudh' (milk in a black pitcher). But she gives compliment to their loving bondage that is beyond physical appearance by comparing Omi as Krishna and Dolly as his flute. When Omi was to marry Dolly, Indu comes to understand the restless Omi and enquired of the reason. When he echoes Dolly's father's words, Indu protested the patriarchal set of mind and its education too saying,

“ In Grantho ne kalank ko hamare mathe ki bindi bana diya...hum ghar baar nate sab tyag kar, aap logo ke sansar mein nange haath chale ate hain. Agni se vi nikal jayenge na, to bhi sage nahi thage hi kahelaynge.” (These books make 'frailty' stick to our character. We sacrifice our home, everything and come to your household. If we even go through the fire, we will not be called to be your own but cheater only.) 1.

From the starting to the end, Emilia keeps on supporting Desdemona's innocence even at the cost of her (Emilia) life. She even doubts on Othello's reaction against the handkerchief and

asks Desdemona if he is jealous or not. But innocent Desdemona who has a strong faith in her husband totally denies it by saying:

Who, he? I think the sun where he was born

Drew all such humours from him. (Desdemona-Act 3, scene 4)

Though she helps Iago to get the handkerchief, she was totally unaware of its consequence until the end. She despises when Othello was outrageous regarding the loss of mere handkerchief which he says a proof of a wife's loose morality. Emilia protests against it and consoles poor Desdemona by striking the very psyche of patriarchal society:

'Tis not a year or two shows us a man:

They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;

To eat us hungerly, and when they are full. (Emilia, Act-3, Scene 4)

It is only she who reveals the whole conspiracy to confused Othello. She didn't care about her husband who only used her as a tool of conspiracy while exploiting her innocence. The belief that she has in

her mistress, Othello fails to realize it. So when he says-

OTHELLO

She's, like a liar, gone to burning hell:

'Twas I that kill'd her.

EMILIA

O, the more angel she,

And you the blacker devil! (Act- 5, Scene- 2)

Even Bianca is also used as a tool like all the female characters. She keeps on loving and believing Cassio but to be cheated finally and unfortunately becomes the reason of attack on her lover. In 'Omkara' Bianca appears as Billo (Bipasa Basu) who is a dancer or in terms of the public, 'bazaru aurat'. Vishal Bhardwaj expresses very delicately through her character that the woman like her has also dream to get respect and live like all the other women in society. Her item performance, 'beedi jalile', provides very well the scenario of patriarchal hunger for a female body in contemporary setting.

While concluding it can be said, in this age when four decades has been passed after the reign of Queen Elizabeth and Shakespeare's golden age, the 21st century does not provide a very promising role to the women. Even women are forced to marry against their will and become ready to worship 'pati, parmashwar' at any cost. The cases starting from domestic violence to molestation or rape is everyday's matter and increasing day by day. In Shakespeare, we saw the death of a noble's beautiful daughter. We are so sympathized with her, but do we show the same sympathy for a not so beautiful, poor girl or wife who suffered the same injury? Unnoticed violence inflicted on the poor women where the both parties are either compromised by the exchange of money or threaten the victim party by politics or force to be quiet. Though there are cases of women's exploitation of men or misusing the act 498a, there are numerous cases where even the violations are not recorded against the husbands because the women do not dare to do so. Women who cheat their father or husband get 'punishment'. Society justifies it by saying 'As you sow, so shall you reap'. But how many of us have seen the example of the same treatment for the 'faulty' husbands. Starting from Raja, Maharaja's harem to the very available prostitute now, the men enjoy the same free licence than the women if you ask us to show the 'card of comparison'. However the male, though in little percentage, also suffers by the women. Therefore, the point of comparison here is not to start debate neither to simply give slogan for feminism as Kamla Bhasin, a feminist activist and social scientist, reflects that the opposite of patriarchy is not matriarchy, but equality. This patriarchal setting not only harms the women but also make the men inferior by preventing to come out their true 'humanity' not 'masculinity'. While commemorating the great persona of the Golden Age of literature, who portrayed the life in the mirror of literature, we relate our today's reality with his dateless creation. The adaptation of *Othello* in the form of *Omkara* thus reflects on the Indian Society with all its bliss and curse for women. Be it through their death, their decision to move on, they protest by revolting against the husband / lover's exploitation, the society's restriction. Desdemona can be you or me in this so called 'developed' patriarchal society which keeps on trying to cut the free wings of women. But Shakespeare's greatness retained not by portraying the tragic facets of women as he places before us a galaxy of women characters like Lady Macbeth (*Macbeth*), Gertrude (*Hamlet*), Goneril and Regan (*King Lear*), Titania (*Midsummer Night's Dream*) who presents the varied psyche of women and therefore cannot be homogenized.

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