

I am not what i am:
iago and langda's
motivations in
'othello' and 'omkara'



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

After four hundred years of being performed on innumerable stages and cinema screens across the globe, Shakespeare's Othello, with its many instances of jealousy, racism, and misogyny, remains a remarkably relevant play. As a result, it has been frequently adapted and translated into a variety of contexts, some of which have been vastly different from that of the original source material. Take, for example, Vishal Bhardwaj's 2006 film Omkara, which takes Shakespeare's seminal text and sets it in the colorful and politically corrupt world of contemporary India. Bhardwaj's adaptation achieves the unique combination of cathartic melodrama, chaotic action sequences, and carefully choreographed music numbers characteristic of the prototypical Bollywood film whilst simultaneously maintaining the oppressive, earthy atmosphere of Shakespeare's monumental tragedy. However, for all its faithfulness and adherence to the essence of Shakespeare's text, Omkara is a radically different beast. This is perhaps most apparent in Saif Ali Khan's portrayal of Iago (renamed "Langda" in Bhardwaj's film), the vengeful and capricious figure responsible for most—if not all—of the suffering in the play: whereas the motives of Shakespeare's Iago are often elusive and ambiguous (and therefore debatable), Langda's motives are portrayed as much more transparent and plausible. Ironically enough, while this particular depiction makes Langda seem to be a more human and sympathetic figure than Iago, it also has the adverse effect of making him a comparatively less interesting character study.

As stated in the preceding paragraph, Iago's motives are notoriously slippery and, therefore, have a tendency to raise more questions than answers. On the surface, it certainly seems as if his malice towards Othello is motivated

by sheer indignation at the latter having chosen Michael Cassio—who, according to Iago, is “[a] fellow [...] / That never set a squadron in the field, / Nor the division of a battle knows (1. 1. 22-5)—as his lieutenant. Iago, who believes he is far more deserving of such a prestigious position than the incompetent Cassio, obviously feels slighted by Othello’s decision: “‘Tis the curse of service,” he laments, “[p]referment goes by letter and affection, / and not by old gradation, where each second / stood heir to th’ first” (1. 1. 37-40). This event certainly seems to be the impetus behind Iago’s actions—at least initially. However, it is worth noting that, if this were truly the case, then Iago technically would have achieved his goal by the end of Act 3, Scene 3, and yet he persists in sowing seeds of discord among the other characters in the play.

As an additional motive, Iago also cites the frankly dubious possibility that his wife Emilia has committed adultery with Othello. He declares:

I hate the Moor, / And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets / ' Has done my office. I know not if 't be true, / But I, for mere suspicion in that kind, / Will do as if for surety [emphasis added]. (1. 3. 429-33)

The weakness of this claim is apparent, and Iago knows it. Other than mere hearsay, he has no legitimate reason to believe that there is a sexual relationship between his wife and Othello. The very nature of the rumor—that it is “thought abroad”—indicates that it is too far removed from the situation to be even remotely truthful, and yet Iago—who is “nothing if not critical” (2. 1. 134)—treats it as if it is a verifiable truth despite the fact that he is well aware of its dubiety. Which begs the question: Why does the

supposedly rational Iago—the man who openly asserts that it is “in ourselves that we are thus or thus” (1. 3. 361-2)—seem so willing to believe an obviously fabricated story? Is he simply looking for an excuse to act on his own irrational, deep-rooted hatred of Othello? Possibly, but if that's the case then where exactly does this hatred stem from in the first place? As noted in the preceding article, Iago achieves his goal halfway through the play—why, then, does he obstinately persist in making Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio's lives a living hell? Is Iago simply a living incarnation of evil or is there something deeper going on here?

Upon a close reading of the play's subtext, it appears that there are several other possible explanations for Iago's behavior. One possible interpretation that is quite popular among modern readers contends that Iago's hatred of Othello is racially charged. The fact that Iago and several other characters in the play consistently make derogatory references to Othello's blackness seems to support this claim. Another interpretation that has gained ground over the years claims that Iago harbors a repressed homosexual desire for Othello, and that his obsessive need to destroy Othello's marriage with Desdemona, coupled with the disdain with which Iago treats his wife Emilia, betrays an unconscious contempt for normative heterosexual relationships. Yet others insist that Iago is ultimately a motiveless, almost Satanic being who delights in evil solely for evil's sake; a sociopathic rhetorician who manipulates and exploits his audience through the use of grandiloquent language and psychological attrition. To these readers, Iago's motive-hunting is little more than an attempt to deflect the audience's suspicion whilst simultaneously gleaning from them their reluctant sympathy.

Whatever the reasoning behind Iago's motives (or lack thereof), he is easily one of the Bard's most memorable creations and certainly his most complex and maddening villain.

In *Omkara*—Vishal Bhardwaj's gritty and political Bollywood reimagining of *Othello*—Iago is rechristened Ishwar Tyagi and, in a rather ingenious filmmaking gesture, given a limp, which, in addition to providing the basis for his nickname “Langda” (which literally translates as “lame” in Hindi), establishes a symbolic connection between him and the Hindu god Shiva, who, according to Hindu mythology, also walked with a limp and is frequently associated with death and destruction. Langda, however, for all his scheming and plotting, is vastly dissimilar to the cold-blooded and honey-tongued Iago in that he is a decidedly human figure whose motives are much more palatable and, though wildly disproportionate to the offenses committed, are perhaps even appropriate given the film's cultural context. For example, Bhardwaj's decision to make Langda and *Omkara* “Omi” Shukla (*Othello*) brothers-in-law (Langda's wife Indu is *Omkara*'s sister) intensifies the betrayal felt by Langda at being passed over in favor of Kesu (*Cassio*), whose irresponsibility and promiscuity—coupled with his youthful inexperience—demonstrates his unsuitability as Omi's lieutenant. Given the emphasis placed on familial relationships in Indian culture, Langda's desire to revenge himself upon Omi is much more understandable when compared to Iago's petulant and seemingly motiveless malignity. Furthermore, while Shakespeare never offers an explanation for why *Othello* chooses *Cassio* to be his lieutenant instead of Iago, Omi admits that he specifically chose Kesu

to be his lieutenant due to his (Kesu's) political influence on the local college students, thereby further intensifying Langda's indignation.

Presenting a contrast to Iago's actions, Omi's betrayal is all the motivation Langda needs. Many of the speculations and theories mentioned earlier are either downplayed or removed entirely from the plot. For example, Langda never accuses his wife Indu (Emilia) of adultery, though, like Iago, he does manage to implicate her in his schemes. Also, while Bhardwaj is able to cleverly translate the racial subtext of Othello into an Indian context by making Omi a "half-caste"—in this case, the illegitimate offspring of a Brahmin priest and a slave woman—this distinction appears to have little effect on Langda's opinion of Omi, thereby undermining any accusation of casteism on Langda's part. Furthermore, the homoerotic tension between Iago and Othello in the original play is almost completely absent from Bhardwaj's adaptation, thereby removing the possibility of a frustrated and repressed sexual longing as one of Langda's motives. As a result of these changes, Bhardwaj's attempt to render Langda as a sympathetic figure ultimately backfires, as Langda, for all his humanity, cannot come close to emulating the psychological complexity of Shakespeare's "Honest Iago."

Bibliography

Omkara. Dir. Vishal Bhardwaj. Perf. Ajay Devgn, Saif Ali Khan, and Kareena Kapoor. Eros Entertainment. 2006. DVD.

Shakespeare, William. Othello. Ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Washington Square, 2009. Print. Folger Shakespeare Library.

<https://assignbuster.com/i-am-not-what-i-am-iago-and-langdas-motivations-in-othello-and-omkara/>