

From Othello's Race to Omkara's Caste: A Study of the Conflicting Political Identities in *Omkara*

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The movie *Omkara* (2006), an adaptation of Shakespeare's play *Othello*, drastically alters the moral landscape of Venice into the crude and scorched landscape of Uttar Pradesh. While Othello's race is widely debated as the centre of postcolonial studies, *Omkara's* caste and Uttar Pradesh's politics becomes the locus for Vishal Bhardwaj's projection of the twenty-first century India. The film, as an adaptation, gains an extra narrative reality, and moves beyond the central character, to sculpt a certain image of the nation-state and the ways in which fulfilment of identities is deflated. The camera movements intensify the conflict of modern politics, dwells into the labyrinthine of Uttar Pradesh's Bahubali culture and captures individuals who exist in a homeless world of modern politics, neither belonging to the modern world nor to the traditional world.

The film beautifully exposes the paradox of Omkara's position which is that of a disempowered Bahubali, in some of the pertinent scenes of the film. As an *Aadabaman* (half-brahmin), Omkara's position oscillates between politically enunciated subjectivity and the socially denied identity. The movie sets in motion the representative case of an inter-caste marriage between Omkara, a half-Brahmin and Dolly Mishra, an upper-caste girl. The disjunction between the indispensable political importance of Omkara is juxtaposed with his social condemnation which exhibits the deep-rooted contradictions of India as a Nation. The different spaces occupied by Omkara reflects this contradiction wherein his educational level, his access to modern institutions like banks, schools, universities, his knowledge regarding his fundamental rights, reservations and caste benefits are woefully lacking. Sunil Khilnani, in his book titled *Idea of India* (1999), highlights the contradictions in the identity of the lower castes. He alludes to Dr. Ambedkar's declaration that recognised in politics the principle of "one man equal to one vote, equals to one value". however, inferred its denial in the social and economic life (Khilnani 34). That marks the point of contradiction in our politics wherein we fabricate equality in politics and we have inequality in social and economic life. Omkara ends up becoming an illiterate thug and the Bahubali for Bhaisahab Mr. Tiwari is still deeply entrenched into the feudal set up of his master. The acts of showing unquestionable obedience to Mr. Tiwari, again reinforce his indoctrination within the feudal set up which puts up a garb of modernity. He possesses the knowledge domain inscribed by

feudalism and in a similar pattern regulates his social and political relations. His psychological submission to Bhaisahab can also be pronounced by the fact that though he may move around and operate in different spaces, but his ultimate residence is located in an agrarian landscape, surrounded by cows, fields, farmers, hand pumps, and a feudal family. The process by which he constructs the identity and aura of Bhaisahab Mr. Tiwari within his mind reflects that politicians do not just occupy physical territory but also the spaces of our consciousness and morality. The character of Omkara constitutes another dimension in terms of setting forth the new alliances operating within the political domain, especially when it comes to UP caste politics. It shows the endeavours by the political parties to affirm collective identities through various inclusive methods and coalitions. Omkara, a half Brahmin, becomes a token figure for the rest of his community while there is no mention of the state-sponsored upliftment of the destitute. He is used as a representation of his class, a Bahubali who would later be promoted to the Vidhan Sabha. His knowledge does not comprise of the tenets of the constitution or our legislative or judiciary, but it lies in his understanding of his community dynamics, securing vote banks, criminalisation of politics and in engaging in all kinds of deviant behaviour. One of the engrossing aspects of the film is the way in which the film-maker bestows a grand entry to the protagonist, creates an aura around him, devotes the title song to the central protagonist and exposes the popular ways in which his marginalised position becomes a thriving political propaganda.

Omkara is no Othello. Though both the protagonists occupy positions of marginality with respect to their race and caste, Omkara's caste gives him the benefits of exclusive Dalit politics. The exercise of these exclusive Dalit politics creates a delusional quality of empowerment for the entire community. The paradox of Omkara's political identity is rooted in the exploitative nature of representational politics. The film-maker's resolution to give centre stage to a character from a marginalised community only debunks the notion of political empowerment of that community and creates a mirage-like quality for Indian democracy which fabricates identities for political ends.

The film, within the larger narrative, becomes less about Omkara and more about the political journey of the upper caste Bhaisahab Tiwari who becomes an all-encompassing figure in the narrative. The latter represents the inversion of the bureaucratic order by encapsulating the judiciary, the prison, the police, the legislature, the bureaucracy and even the voice of common masses. It is as if all the State systems live and run via him and through him. The movie introduces his character when he is sheltering himself in the State prison.



Figure 1.1 Bhai Sahab Tiwari in the prison

However, the prison does not represent bondage or confinement for him, but it is a space that stands for his personal choice, a place of safety where he practises a farcical embodiment of celibacy as a rebounding force to strengthen his elections. Prison becomes a space for him to exercise all kinds of transgression of rules where Omkara and his fellows can enter and exit with their personal guns and mobile phones, while he himself can order for the depositing of his personal valuables. It is yet another portal for Bhai Sahab to practice his politics wherein all the outside activities can be directed and manipulated by him. Bahubali (Omkara) and his gang can play the role of fake police any time to achieve their own ends without impunity.

Bhai Sahab sometimes appears in a Nehruvian attire and sometimes with a bald head and a dhoti, which again reflects how he assimilates internal diversity and dynamism to become a face of the Nation. Thus, he represents not only the feudal order but also the modern concept of the State as proposed by Nehru and thereby, building an image that masquerades the voice of the feudal, the modern, the Brahmins, the non-Brahmins, and the educated youth, such as Kesu. This versatility becomes a mechanism for his performance and display of authority. By manifesting the diversity in a singularised entity, it again echoes the contradiction of our society wherein the name of State, democracy, patriotism, social, and economic development, India is constructed into a single political community which reduces the manifold variety into a single universal set of policy and places them at the disposal of the States. Finally, when Bhai Sahab wins the elections—whose outcomes were already decided in the truck journey that Omkara undertook—the latter uses the discourse of the “triumph of Truth over injustice,” to justify it which, in-turn, unravels the most ironic reality of democratic India. Bhai Sahab Tiwari embodies the novel ways of flattering popular cultural sensibilities and feeds their populist instinct. He

does so through the choice of his clothes to have a patriotic appeal and installs party representatives like Omkara who are popular mass icons.



Figure 1.2 Bhai Sahab Tiwari's release from the jail

The narratives used by Bhai Sahab shows how regional parties inscribe their ideologies on the national political imagination. He comes across as a politician who has rehearsed the language of democracy, of Nehruvian outfits, of Gandhian discourses, and has subtly altered the definition of Indian political community. Democratic politics is characterised by electoral competition, acquisition of states, conflicting ideologies and imbalances that cannot harmoniously integrate the regional voices and claims of caste identity with the National identity. Writer Sunil Khilnani, reflecting on the concept of modern cities states, “The idea of modern cities— to the poor, to migrants from countryside, to the destitute, never reached” (118). Ishwar Tyagi, another major character and the cinematic equivalence of the classic villain— Iago (in *Othello*), represents another segment of the larger political family, filled with the feelings of discontent about his non-representability in the discourse of power politics, despite serving it for fifteen years. The power dynamics are also apparent from the fact that Omkara possesses a colossal house located at a comparatively elevated land while Ishwar Tyagi possesses a small one. This disappointment is a result of the altering identity politics in Uttar Pradesh under Bhai Sahab. The initial political family installing a feudal and caste-based representation modifies its agenda to transfer the representation to an educated college youth. The shift in representation does not happen from a Bahubali, a feudal representative (Omkara, muscle man, feudal and half Brahmin) to another feudal identity (Ishwar Tyagi), but it transfers to an educated college youth who can draw more votes. Though Kesu becomes the face of the party yet at the fundamental level, the party still remains a feudal-oriented one. His motives and coalition with Rajjo are representative of the survivalist instincts within the larger politics

that is based on constantly modifying identities, where parties create “identities” akin to conflict rather than to competition and where identities can be activated or suddenly made sterile depending on the vote banks they can fetch. In modern politics that Bhaisahab designs, new definitions of identity are reconstituted, and they cannot remain feudal for too long; therefore, it calls for the rejection of Ishwar Tyagi and promotion of Kesu. In Kesu, the young educated college youth, Bhaisahab creates mirage-like quality of modern representation, therefore marking a recycle of old phenomena. Ishwar Tyagi sees the infiltration of new identities as a threat to his own progress since he had been serving the party for fifteen years, the feeling of being dispossessed overtakes him. The scene where Ishwar Tyagi breaks the mirror, and with his own blood rubbed on the forehead assumes a self-proclaimed identity, marks his departure from the main political narrative that does not recognise him and he assumes a separate identity which he tries to collaborate with Rajan Rajjo Tiwari, since they both represent sects that have been marginalised and disinherited from the main political identity.



Figure 1.3 Ishwar Tyagi breaks the mirror and smears the blood on his head

Forming a coalition, they do not speak the language of community representation but of individual identity materialisation. Their coalition is based on the fact that Ishwar Tyagi would assist Rajjo in realising his dream of attaining Dolly. These men, who see the State as an all-authoritarian entity with none of its institutions serving their interests or accommodating them, represent another division within the society. Ishwar Tyagi’s discontent is perceptible from the choice of clothes he wears which are always dark shaded or grey, also reflecting his fears of the dark, infertile, impotent and shrinking future. Such tendencies are characteristics of Indian political system where as much as the democratic struggle has intensified; it has led to the proliferation of new categories. Even though Indian politics is imagined as a community of equals but it is a battleground where time and again identities are disputed and reconfigured. The vision that

framed India's plurality and diversity into a concept of unity has now become a threat to its democratic functioning.

The character of Kesu represents the emerging strata in the politics, symbolising modern and educated face of the party, adding on to more divisions in politics, in terms of its installation of leaders for vote banks. The new political family tries to incorporate and appeal to different sects, rather than invoking the ideas of people and Nation, it operates to subscribe to the immediate volatile authority of the electoral majority. Though externally the party appears homogeneous incorporating diverse interests, but internally it harbours differences. It tries to singularise various identities and in the process of doing so ends up in an unsuccessful democracy. Kesu emblematises the shifting representation dynamics of the party. It reflects predominantly the manifestation of regional interests rather than a reinforcement of nationalism. Empowerment of one is at the cost of disempowering the other. There is installation of a new leader, new ideologies and creation of new identities according to the service they can provide. Politics puts on the garb of modernism and functions in a feudal manner, thereby making the modern State a fickle, deceptive and fictive entity. Kesu's character represents the constant political negotiations and redefinitions.

The coronation ceremony where Kesu is crowned as the new Bahubali voices the new configuration of power, where it is not a religious ceremony as much as a political performance aiming for electoral ends. It defines the new political family that is oriented to draw votes from the educated youths. The composition of this scene becomes very pertinent in terms of the playing out power relations. Bhaisahab Mr. Tiwari, Omkara Bahubali, Kesu and Ishwar Tyagi sit on a lionised and exalted platform from where they can see the entire public but the public cannot touch them. Followed by the constantly ringing temple bells and recitation of mantras, Omkara hands over the position of Bahubali to Kesu and the announcement of the same is made by Ishwar Tyagi from that adulated platform.



Figure 1.4 The coronation ceremony of the Bahubali

The declaration is followed by fanatical dancing, drum beating and gunshots by the public which comes across as a homogenised group, all clubbed together, undifferentiated yet tossing varied Holi colours to cast a sense of distinctiveness. The colours represent an assortment, confusion and hotchpotch of the mob and mob psychology. The homogenisation of the people represents the way political parties' function in a representative democracy, where a single political identity is carved out of diverse identities, and elections become a mere process of identity creation. The colours also show the internal differences that lay at the heart of all identities and emerge as potential deviants in the face of hollow democracy that masquerades their representation without serving their interests. Ishwar Tyagi representing similar tendencies performs the dance of disgruntlement, filled with grievances against this political representation.

The power of the State determines the commercial and trade aspect of Uttar Pradesh politics. This becomes evident from the character of Rajjo who represents the relation between economics and politics. Rajjo is unable to articulate his discontent against the wrong done to him; he is unable to express his disappointment and lack of self-assertion in order to claim his love for Dolly since Bhaisahab and his gang regulate all the alehouses owned by him. They would all be shut down in case Rajjo shows dissent. This again reinforces the classical tendencies of our contemporary reality where politics is set against the modern commercial society as dramatically shown in the cities. These instances become symbols of uneven, contradictory and masquerading characteristics of Nation's modern life which claims to be a liberalised and privatised economy, yet at the fundamental level remains rooted into the feudal oriented layout with the concentration of power in the figure of the Bhaisahab. The thorough analysis of Indian politics by Sunil Khilnani aids in understanding the malfunctioning administration. According to the writer, "Policy choices about education, environment resources and fiscal responsibility, foreign affairs—their aptness does not depend on entrepreneurial brilliance or technological prowess or the cheapness of its labour but on politics" (146). The *kamarbandh* which belonged to Omkara, a half-Brahmin, stood for his tradition, purity, identity and his lineage. He values and treasures it and passes on its authority to Dolly, only to be later stolen by Indu upon Tyagi's behest. Seizing the opportunity, Ishwar Tyagi takes possession of it and uses it to manipulate Kesu by asking him to gift it to Billo, his girlfriend, so that she is pleased by this present and assists Kesu in championing his trust over Omkara, and in successfully killing his opponents at the political party. Billo wears it around her waist and dances in order to entice the rival political leaders, which finally leads to their demise amidst bloodshed. And when Omkara finally gets it back, he sees it as a symbol of betrayal, adultery and bogus.

The *kamarbandh* symbolises the idea of our Nation, which is envisioned in all its idealism with connotations of progress, development, welfare and purity of intentions attached to it. It constitutes the sacrifices of all those who helped in achieving and building this democratic sovereignty, however as it passed through feudal hands, modern ideologies, marginalised groups, each school of thought constructed its own idea of a nation and identity which ultimately rendered the society into hollow democracy with use of identities as a catalyser of personal interests. In the end, this idea left individuals feeling disillusioned and deceived. The movie also shows how the modern State employs technology at the service of political manipulations. The use of MMS sex scandal by Omkara and his gang against the opposition, sting operations and use of women has become the hallmark of our modern politics. Politics remain a masculine space that targets the personal space for political ends. It portrays the political reality of the states where the decision regarding who would own the seat in Lok Sabha is decided among thugs travelling in trucks, where gunshots, bloodshed, easy availability of weapons, implantation of political enforcer in the form of Bahubalis and criminalisation of politics define democracy and nationalism of the country. The film confronts the core issues that lie at the heart of Indian politics and challenges the notions of ‘unity in diversity’ and the notions of plurality and heterogeneity as markers of India’s identity. These insights place the discourse of Indian Nationality under scrutiny.

Further, the entire concept of nationalism and identity becomes complicated when it is seen as state machinery. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson asserts the idea that “nation is an invention which uses the emblem of freedom”. The challenges of freedom and individual rights, which never get addressed, reinforce the fact that Nation was never created for the interests of the people, but as a product of modernity, it was created for political and economic ends. The concept of nationalism does not materialise the fundamental tenets of freedom, democracy and welfare (50).

The film projects a misreading of the relation between nation and the region in India, wherein the fundamental matter of India’s selfhood has not yet been settled. It is difficult to assert that ‘cities’ are an expression of the Nation’s faith in future. These towns impose their regional sensibilities upon India’s national politics and become the sites of sharp contests as parties try to establish a majority in the name of representation. Caste and kin function at a more expansive terrain within the politics of representation. The film echoes Khilnani’s words, which states that “the conceptual sense of ‘city’ is weak. It has fostered new and distinct kinds of social relations—neither traditional nor modern” (146). The film successfully captures the defeat of national feelings in the cities and postulates Khilnani’s idea that the cities continue to make the politics of India,

but the politics it is making and the India it is coming to believe in, have wandered far from what was intended and imagined in the early days. The last words of Ishwar Tyagi, wherein he states that there is no difference between his truth and his lie is analogous to our democracy which is marked by utter fabrications, and it is challenging to locate the gap between the theory of the Nation as imagined and the practical reality that we live and experience every day. It is the failure of that vision to materialise into reality, and indeed it has been distorted in a manner that we just live in the shadow of that vision. Through the dramatisation of personal agony and crisis, the play and the film open avenues to scrutinise the society and individual's position in it within the matrix of institutions that govern him/her.

While *Othello* critiques the western society and the white man's claims of racial superiority and undermines their identity politics, its adaptation in Indian context (*Omkara*) provides an index of ideologies that undermines the concept of democracy and nation state in India. Both the texts provide insights into the reality that is constantly being negotiated by the identity dynamics – be it racial identity, caste identity, political identity, social standing, or gender identity.

In *The Idea of India*, Sunil Khilnani elaborates on the evolution of the concept of State and asserts that “the absence of any neutral arm of the state to police and to provide protection, especially in regions like UP and Bihar has left this essential responsibility to the discretion of the politicians and men who command armed gangs, which gives these towns a culture of violence” (146). Building upon these lines, the movie shows a disappointing form of politics and the failure of democracy and concepts of nationalism.

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