

# "Light Your Cigarette with My Heart's Fire, My Love": Raunchy Dances and a Golden- hearted Prostitute in Bhardwaj's *Omkara* (2006)

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## Abstract

This essay argues that *Omkara* (dir. Vishal Bhardwaj, 2006) foregrounds contemporary gender concerns in modern, small-town India, primarily through the film's reformulation of the three female roles in *Othello*. Billo/Bianca, played by a glamorous, contemporary, female star, gets her own romance and two popular and raunchy song-and-dance tracks in *Omkara*. These dance tracks are a peculiar mixture of traditional folk Nautanki and identifiable Bollywood masala "item numbers," whose layered lyrics have been penned by Gulzar, a well-known poet, lyricist, scriptwriter, and ex-film-director who closely collaborates with Bhardwaj. The essay argues for the recognition of the songs in *Omkara* as a parallel narrative that intertwines with and intersects the central narrative of the plot, inflecting it with a range of cultural and social intertexts, along with a dash of metatextual flavor. The article examines how the two song-and-dance sequences by Billo/Bianca in the film use the familiar tropes of the "courtesan" figure of Hindi films and draw upon traditional folk-theater — reflecting both its local poetry and its vulgarity — to evoke a new kind of verbal and visual "realism" that intertwines Bollywood glamor with local histories.

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*Omkara*, with its big budget stars, glossy production values, and popular song-and-dance numbers interspersing the narrative — elements that are often associated with the "Bollywood" style of Hindi cinema — is the most obviously commercial of Vishal Bhardwaj's three Shakespearean adaptations. All three adaptations, *Maqbool/Macbeth* (2003), *Omkara/Othello* (2006), and *Haider/Hamlet* (2014) are notable for emerging from the heart of the commercial Mumbai film industry and making a fair profit at the domestic box-office, while garnering international recognition. The recent visibility of Asian cinema on the global stage and the cultural currency of screen Shakespeare have, no doubt, contributed to the success of the films. However, the successful commercial releases of these films in the vast Indian domestic market and their

circulation in the overseas market and international film festival circuits showcase Bhardwaj's skillful negotiation of the expectations of distinctly different audiences in these adaptations.

A defining feature of Bhardwaj's adaptations is his ability to follow the Shakespearean plot closely while keenly evoking specific landscapes and local, identifiable characters that merge seamlessly with the genre-oriented structure of Bollywood films. *Omkara* plays out the *Othello* drama as a mixture of crime drama and romance in a small north-Indian town riddled with politics and crime. Race is reframed, rather pertinently in the Indian context, as a caste issue, which is a deeply entrenched and unjust social stratification that still inflects the social and political fabric of contemporary India. However, it is the film's focus on female sexuality and the underlying violence of its monitoring, often legitimized in the institution of marriage and romanticized in Indian cinema, that gives this adaptation its particular edge. This essay provides a reading of *Omkara* that focuses on the ways in which issues of female sexuality are interrogated in the film through its three female characters: Dolly (Desdemona), Indu (Emilia), and Billo (Bianca). It discusses, in particular, two song-and-dance sequences featuring Billo, examining the ways in which these sequences extend the scope of the narrative beyond the confines of the plot to include a range of social, cultural, and literary contexts that reference both local histories and contemporary gender issues.

### Songs and Dances in Hindi Films

*Omkara*'s big-budget star cast and its typical song-and-dance numbers raised the stakes for the success of the film in the domestic market. A great number of the initial expectations of the film's domestic success rested on the popularity of the seven songs in this film. Songs are one of the most distinctive features of Indian commercial cinema. Sung diegetically by multiple characters, and often by the main romantic pair, they circulate independently on television and radio as very popular forms of entertainment that cut across divisions of class and age. They enter seamlessly into the cultural fabric of Indian society, played or sung at marriage festivities, games, religious festivals, fairs, and group activities of all sorts. Their wide-ranging appeal and cultural currency draw upon a multitude of cultural, literary, religious, and local traditions, and they incorporate a wide variety of influences, including Indian classical music, Indian folk music, and religious *bhajans*, as well as Western pop and classical, Latin American, and Arabian music — to name just a few. In the large, diasporic Indian community, they often become reference points for establishing the sense of a shared past and an idealized pan-national identity. These songs, frequently accompanied by dance sequences, are now used to promote the films aggressively on television and radio, and often the success or failure of the songs has a strong impact on the success of the forthcoming film.

Of late, these sequences have been lavishly and slickly produced and have become an identifiable feature of the "Bollywood" style that has acquired some recognition among the global audience. Such recognition, however, does not necessarily translate into acceptance. A degree of exoticization or a lack of familiarity with the conventions of this form lends itself to either a complete omission of the songs in critical references, or, at best, a superficial nod to them as glamorous window-dressing. Moreover, a certain reductive homogenization is evident in the "Bollywood" label itself, which while providing these songs with "global" currency, imposes a pan-Indian face on it. This encourages an elision of cultural and regional specificities that songs and dances frequently reference. A serious lack of academic scholarship focused on songs and dances in Indian cinema aggravates the situation and often leads to incorrect assumptions and claims about these songs. Critical studies such as Lalitha Gopalan's *Cinema of Interruptions* (2006), Anna Morcom's *Hindi Film Songs and the Cinema* (2007), and Sangita Gopal and Sujata Moorti's *Global Bollywood: The Travels of Hindi Song and Dance* (2008) have somewhat redressed this neglect, but much more sustained research needs to be done in this area. Gopalan's analysis of Indian cinema, for example, as linear, logical narratives interspersed with "interruptions," considers song-and-dance sequences as constituting an alternative creative space. Similar studies providing critical terminology for these sequences would greatly enhance the potential for engendering more fruitful and critical debates about them and encourage cross-cultural comparisons and contrasts with related global forms.

### *Omkaara*: Reception, Plot, and Adaptation

*Omkaara* was released commercially in 2006 and entered the U.K. Top Ten charts along with Hollywood hits released in the same year, such as *Cars*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, and *Superman Returns* (Shahryar 2006). The contemporary British film reviews of *Omkaara* provide a telling example of the continued neglect of film songs despite the global currency of Hindi films. The reviewers were largely appreciative of the film's polished direction and its narrative style, yet their reactions to the songs were quite dismissive, ranging from Philip French's casual afterthought at the end of his analysis, "[t]here are the usual Bollywood songs," to Demetrious Matheou's more trenchant summation, "[i]t's a bit rum when Iago breaks into a song-and-dance number, when Desdemona's murder is followed by a trilling love song" (Matheou 2006). While one could make a polemical point about operatic adaptations of Shakespeare plays making similar "rum" moves, it is perhaps more useful to look at the song-and-dance tracks in question in detail, factoring in the music, lyrics, choreography, acting, and dancing that layer the song sequences of *Omkaara*. Moreover, the idea of song-and-dance sequences in Hindi cinema as

providing an alternative cinematic space that is "different" from the dominant paradigms of linear, logical narratives allows for a more nuanced analysis of the dance sequences of Billo, which, in particular, have been singled out as extraneous "item numbers" or crowd-pullers in *Omkara*.

*Omkara*, made in Hindi, situates the *Othello* story in the dry and dusty plains of Uttar Pradesh, or U.P., as it is commonly called in Northern India. It is the story of Omkara (Othello), a small-time leader of a criminal gang, who gains a degree of legitimacy by entrenching himself as the coercive arm of the local corrupt politician, Bhaisahib (Duke). Omkara, who unofficially works for Bhaisahib, abducts Dolly (Desdemona), the college-educated daughter of a well-known lawyer of the town, on her wedding day. The father of the girl accuses Omkara of abducting his daughter forcibly, but Dolly admits to having gone with Omkara of her own will. The father, in a statement very similar to the one made by Desdemona's father in *Othello*, bitterly warns Omkara that the daughter who could betray him this easily would one day betray Omkara. Iago's role is played by Langda (Lame) Tyagi, who is Omkara's henchman. Langda is disappointed when the second-in-command position is bestowed upon Kesu (Cassio), nicknamed "Firangee" (foreigner) by his group because he is young, college-educated, and seems more "westernized" to them. Langda gets Kesu drunk during a rowdy celebration party and instigates a brawl, which angers Omkara and results in Kesu's dismissal. Kesu, who is Dolly's classmate, asks Dolly to intercede on his behalf. Omkara's jealousy, fostered by Langda, finally leads him to murder Dolly on their wedding night.

As the preceding summary reveals, the central narrative of the film remains close to the Shakespearean plot, with a few notable exceptions, such as the shifting of the marriage of Dolly and Omkara to the end of the story and the expanded roles of Indu (Emilia) and Billo (Bianca). The marriage of Dolly and Omkara takes place at the end of the film, before which Dolly lives openly with Omkara. This would be considered a transgression of social norms — both within the diegetic space of the film as well as outside it — as large sections of the Indian middle-class audience would be uncomfortable with the concept, if not outright reject it. The "innocence" of Dolly is problematized deliberately by postponing the marriage of Dolly and Omkara to the end of the movie. Rather than the "half-caste" Omkara, it is she who is consistently "othered" in the film, a condition highlighted at various points in the narrative. This deliberate conflation of the issue of Dolly's innocence regarding her fidelity with her sexuality is further linked to the expanded roles of the other two female characters, Indu and Billo, whose social positions are explicitly compared and contrasted with Dolly's.

Both Dolly's and Billo's social positions are constantly under threat in the film because they are not legitimately married. Indu's social position, however, is the most stable, as she is the legitimate wife of Langda Tyagi. She is also the mother of a male child, a position that still carries

tremendous social currency in contemporary India, with its lopsided sex ratio — recorded in the latest census as 940 women per 1,000 males (Census 2011 India). Considering herself Omkara's sister and teasing him on occasion, she occupies an authoritative social space as the "fulfilled" married woman or *Bhabhi*, a role that has simultaneously been de-sexualized and celebrated in countless Hindi films. This authoritative space is strengthened further by casting Konkana Sen, who is widely known for her acting prowess, in the role. *Omkara* both employs and deliberately overturns this social and "Bollywood" image by providing Indu with a formal space in which to express her sexual dissatisfaction, mainly through highlighting her silences and focusing on her eyes in shots that visually register her lack of a vocabulary to express that dissatisfaction verbally. Even though she provides a moral compass for *Omkara* and offers a sense of feminine agency in killing her husband at the end of the film, her personal fate remains mired in a dead end, as suggested by the final shot of her, desperately facing a well, contemplating suicide.

While Indu's role in the film speaks directly to issues of female agency, Billo's expanded role in the film negotiates a more complicated and compromised space. She is the prostitute Bianca in Shakespeare's play, but in *Omkara*, she is also Kesu's love interest, a woman whom he intends to marry. As a prostitute, Billo's social position in society is that of a sexual object, making her vulnerable to exploitation and placing her at the other end of the gender spectrum as the most obviously "othered" character in the narrative. As Kesu's love interest, Billo's personality is fleshed out, obviously in order to build her up as a sympathetic character. Her cynicism and foul colloquial slang are balanced against her powerful attraction for, and her vulnerability towards, Kesu. Her earthy language brings a strong dose of realism to her character, which obviously contrasts with those Hindi screen prostitutes who either speak a courtly polite Urdu or a non-region-specific polished Hindi. On the other hand, her role does derive from a standard stock character in Hindi cinema — the courtesan/prostitute with the heart of gold who often ends up sacrificing her life for the hero.

The Indian screen stereotype of the golden-hearted courtesan, who is often sentimentalized and appropriated into the larger discourse of patriarchy to contain her sexuality, is elaborated in some detail in Sumita S. Chakravarty's book, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1941-1987*. Discussing the emancipatory possibilities of the popular "courtesan genre" in Indian cinema, Chakravarty points out that the courtesan's profession gives her a certain economic independence and autonomy to function outside societal norms. However, the potential of the role gets dissipated by "romance" and "purity" narratives once she falls in love with the protagonist, at which point she transitions into the traditional role of a committed married wife (269-305). Thus, the courtesan's "tragedy" and the subsequent sympathy generated for her pivot around empathizing with her

thwarted desire at not being accorded the recognition or status of a married wife, which supports the very status quo that her role potentially disrupts. Billo's dreams of marrying Kesu certainly reference this stereotype. However, the consistently egalitarian, on-screen depiction of the Billo-Kesu relationship negates the stereotype of the subservient wife/lover both visually and verbally. Billo is often positioned on top of Kesu, and her playful abuses aimed at him far outnumber his comebacks. In the *Beedi* song, in fact, there is a shot of Billo with her foot on Kesu's heart (see figure 1). This is particularly striking in contrast to the marked gender inequality between the other two couples in the film.

### Billo/Bianca's Two Song-and-Dance Sequences in *Omkara*

The space from which Billo speaks to gendered "othering" is further complicated by her participation in two sexually provocative song-and-dance sequences. Her narrative positioning as the most marginalized or "othered" character in *Omkara* is visually contradicted in the song sequences, where she is at the center, framed as the obvious object of desire for the exclusively male crowd that surrounds and lusts after her. The issues of both scopophilia and commercialization evident in these songs need to be informed by the complex cultural and social history of songs and dances in Indian films. In *Omkara*, Billo is played by Bipasha Basu, a model turned popular "A-grade" star. Apart from being offered substantial roles in big-budget films, she also does guest appearances in films, thus increasing the commercial value of those films. Indian stars frequently appear in carefully crafted "item numbers" or songs, lavish dance numbers that are very aggressively marketed and targeted to draw the crowds into the theaters. Bhardwaj was well aware of the commercial value of the song — the following quotation from an interview before the release of the film reveals his attempts to balance his commercial concerns with his artistic ambitions: "For the *Beedi* . . . song I told [the lyricist, Gulzar] I wanted an item song bigger than *Paan khayi saaiyan hamar* and *Jhumka gira re*. These were mass-oriented songs, but still so classy. Only Gulzar saab could do it" (Bhardwaj 2006).

A brief note about the film's lyricist, Sampooran Singh Kalra, or Gulzar, as he is popularly referred to, is relevant here. Bhardwaj entered films as a music composer, and has continued this career along with his career as a film director, composing music for his own films and for the films of other directors. He has formed a particularly productive, professional relationship with Gulzar, who apart from being a respected poet and writer in India, is a notable film director in his own right, and is often acknowledged by Bhardwaj as his mentor. Gulzar's successful adaptation of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* — *Angoor* [Grapes] (1982) — remains one of the rare acknowledged adaptations of Shakespeare in mainstream Hindi films of the eighties that was a

commercial and a critical success. Gulzar gave Vishal Bhardwaj his first break as a music director in his film *Maachis* [Matchstick] (1996), and he has composed the lyrics of all of Bhardwaj's films, just as Bhardwaj composed the songs of Gulzar's last two films before Gulzar's unofficial retirement from film direction. The importance of songs in Bhardwaj's films also needs to be seen in the context of this intermeshed partnership between the two directors, and their longstanding and strong commitment to music and lyrics in their dual, overlapping careers.

The raunchy lyrics of the song *Beedi jalaile jigar se piya/jigar mein badi aag hai* [light the cigarette with my heart, my love / my heart's full of fire] is often referenced as typifying the "Bollywood" element of *Omkara*. However, analyzing both the lyrics and the dance in the context of the folk tradition, which has a very specific, local feel of rural northern India, provides a very different context for the song. It harkens back to a long tradition of Nautanki, which is a form of folk theater including song, dance, and comedy routines. It involves both epic and bawdy elements, and existed as a form of vaudeville that was the most popular mode of entertainment in rural northern India before the advent of films and television. Gulzar is particularly interested in this form of theater, as is evident from films such as *Naram Garam* [Soft and Sizzling] (dir. Hrishikesh Mukherjee, 1981), for which he provided the lyrics, and *Namkeen* [Salty] (dir. Gulzar, 1982), which includes sympathetic characters from the Nautanki. *Namkeen*, in particular, has as its central character an old, almost senile woman who was a former Nautanki singer trying to fend for herself and her three daughters in a small village. Bhardwaj's reference, in his interview, to *paan khayee saiiyyan hamaar* [My lover chews betel leaves] concerns a song from a very well-known Hindi film — based on a literary novella — titled *Teesri Kasam* [The Third Promise] (dir. Basu Bhattacharya, 1967), which is about the life of another Nautanki dancer. The song, in the film adaptation of the novella, with its evocation of the rural folk tradition of India, is considered a classic. Bhardwaj's quotation thus references not just the theater history of Nautanki, but its film history as well.

The Nautanki feel of the *Beedi* song, epitomized by its leading image of the popular *beedi* (a locally made, poor man's cigarette), has been glamorized by the presence of a svelte Bipasha Basu, but the folk elements remain strong in the lyrics, the music, and the style in which the song is performed. The layered lyrics of the choric chant of the song are worth noting: *Na Gilaaf, Na Lihaaf, Thandi Hawa ke khilaaf, Sasuri / Itti Sardi hai kisi ka lihaaf lai le / Ja padosi ke chulhe se aag lai le* [No pillow cases, No blankets, / Bracing this chilled wind, Cruel one! / It is freezing, go get someone's blanket / Go get the fire from the neighbor's place]. The song's lyrics evoke the freezing winters in northern Indian villages, when people gather around fires and sing songs to beat the winter's chill. The dominant images of beds, blankets, and pillows are suggestive of illicit affairs, as well as a sharing of scarce resources, as is the allusion to getting the fire from the

neighbor's house. Such suggestive, bawdy lyrics are an intrinsic part of the generic folk tradition, even as they playfully pick up the specific theme of extramarital deceit that is the central concern of the plot.

The dance sequence plays up the thematic concerns of the film in a number of its dominant images and throwaway lines that include premonitions of Dolly's fate. The dance pulses with the leashed tension of the male crowd, reflected in their sexually aggressive dance moves and lyrics, as Billo and Kesu flirt with words in the foreground. Kesu's line, *Na kasoor, na fatoon, bina jurr-am ke hajoor, mar gaye* [No fault, no obsession . . . without a crime, my lord . . . we die] fits in smoothly with the use of such words and phrases in typical romantic songs, albeit with a regional flavor — in the extension of the more formal *jurm* [crime] to *jurr-am*, and the use of the "j" sound instead of the more formally pure "z" sound in the *Urdu hajoor* [sir]. At one point, Billo cajoles him to "call a court" one afternoon, involving just the two of them, for which she promises to come dressed in anklets. And yet, words such as *kasoor* [fault], *fatoon* [a mispronunciation of *fitoor*, which means obsession], *jurm* [crime], *kachehri* [court], and *mar gaye* [dying], expressed playfully and provocatively, become unmoored in the song, carrying ominous undertones which finally extend beyond the confines of the plot. They underscore the crucially unstable position of women in a society where the undercurrent of violence is often masked by the blanket of respectability that the institution of marriage provides it, and the romance with which cinema, in particular, imbues marriage. The sequence's self-reflexive participation in romanticizing and glamorizing such sexual monitoring is peculiarly efficacious in its balancing of many contending social, artistic, and thematic resonances, and particularly so when the song is interspersed right in the middle for thirty-eight seconds with an intimate scene between Dolly and Omkara. This "interruption" within the "interrupted" space of the song foregrounds the waistband, which in the film is the repository of both tradition and sexuality, and is the agent that pushes the romance of Omkara and Dolly towards violence and murder.

Moreover, nestling within evocative words such as *kachehri* [court], and erotic phrases such as *aisa kaate ki daant ka nisan reh jaaye* [a bite that leaves teeth-marks], rest archaic meanings of words and phrases that point to both local and national histories that are lost to contemporary usage. *Kachehri*, for example, according to Gulzar, is the deliberate evocation of a forgotten feudal term that means *diwankhana* and the tradition associated with it, comprising traditional festivities, involving *nautch*-girls, which were held in the courtyards of the zamindars or landlords ("Gulzar reveals the meaning" 2011). In another interview, Gulzar claims that "*Beedi Jalaile* is about the *zamindaarana* [feudal] system." The phrase "*Aisa Kaate ke . . .*," he points out, "is where I compare *zamindaars* to Alsatian dogs who leave bite marks. What people took away from the song is a



different thing" ("Gulzar on how" 2015). The same lines, *Na [Qu]soor, na f[i]toor, bina jurram ke huzoor, mar gaye* [No fault, no obsession . . . without a crime, my lord . . . we die] in this context take on a different meaning as a protest against the excesses of the feudal system. The *Beedi* song's ability to hold these contradictory meanings requires such "thick" descriptions to understand its evocation of the intertwined elements of theater, cinematic tradition, regional literature, and culture, even as it distinguishes itself from earlier, more genteel film renditions, such as *Teesri Kasam*, as literally a more "vulgar" and hence more "realistic" reflection of the local culture.

The visual register of the dance sequence provides a carefully detailed background evoking the semi-rural atmosphere of a small town in Uttar Pradesh. At the same time, it maintains the glamorous and controlled dance in sync with the sophisticated lighting and orchestration of a "Grade A" Bollywood film production that won Ganesh Acharya, the film's choreographer, the prestigious Indian Filmfare Award for choreography. The opening shots of the dance provide an interesting vignette of this transition when Billo, covered and positioned in front of the harmonium in a more "traditional" style of the song, suddenly throws off her *dupatta* (scarf) at the crowd to reveal her more glamorous attire, which corresponds with her later, more modern "Bollywood *jhatkas*" (shaking of the hips associated with Bollywood dance moves, see figures 6 and 7). The dance sequence takes place amongst the celebrations outside the building where Omkara and Dolly consummate their relationship. The exterior shots of that building, with its latticed balcony and the *shamiyana* (temporary celebration tent), are as carefully detailed as the close-ups of the makeshift stage where Bipasha Basu as Billo dances, surrounded by her musicians. The background of a big satin banner announcing the name of her company, "Billo Chamanbahar and Orchestra" — the English phrase written in Hindi along with her phone number — keenly evoke the air of a small town and the local dancer's humble attempt at entrepreneurship responding to shifts in the local economy. Minute details such as the odd beer in *firangee* Kesu's hands, contrasting with the local rum in the hands of the others in the crowd, and the ubiquitous *charpais* (stringed, wooden beds) on which they sit and on which they finally hoist Billo and Kesu in drunken, enthusiastic celebration, are as region-specific as the language and the clothes that ground the plot in the semi-rural milieu.

The second song-and-dance track, *Namak Ishq ka* [The Salt of Love], which features Billo, also pays close attention to minute background details. It is much more obviously related to the plot of the film. Billo, who has accepted Kesu's proposal, agrees to help out Omkara's gang and is sent as a decoy to the police station to trap the members of a rival gang who are plotting against Bhaisahib. Once again, the setting, the lyrics, and the visual and aural registers of the song extend beyond the scope of the immediate plot and the narrative. In this context, Susanne Gruss's analysis of *Omkara*, concerning the realism of the two songs featuring Billo, is worth noting: "Billo is,

however, neither filmed in a sumptuous setting, nor is her choreography as elaborately staged as audiences might expect. The gritty realism of both bar scenes is a decided move away from the anti-realism of comparable scenes, the colors are subdued instead of luminous and saturated, neither scene is brightly lit" (Gruss 2009, 233). While Gruss's article certainly counts as a rare instance (along with Poonam Trivedi's recent article titled "Singing to Shakespeare in *Omkara*" [2013]) in which Hindi songs are discussed in some detail, Gruss's observations and comments misrepresent these particular songs. As a detailed description of the songs was not within the scope of the essay, it reflects, perhaps inevitably, a tendency to homogenize the songs while defining their stylistic variations from other "Bollywood" songs.

While it is true that both dance sequences are realistic, they are realistic in very different ways. The first song is sung on an open stage and uses bright, gaudy colors that are typical of the Nautanki style, even though it is a glamorized version of the style. The second song sequence, choreographed by a different artist, Bhushan Lakhandri, is sepia-toned and not particularly realistic. Its use of coordinated color tones, balancing the khaki uniform of the crowd with the browns of Billo's dress, and her muted yet perfect makeup, lend the scene the glamor of a more generic, high-end Bollywood production. It does, however, use the very realistic backdrop of a local police station, not a "bar-room," and the drinking and dancing policemen, in their very identifiable khaki uniform of the Uttar Pradesh police force, are indulging in an illegal practice of getting a "*nautch* girl" for entertainment in the office. The gritty realism of this scene emerges out of closely observed details about the building, which is a typical, run-down colonial British-style building with wide rooms, peeling walls, solid, wooden doors, and windows thickly coated with green paint. These buildings are still commonly used in post-Independence India as government buildings, especially in small towns that have not undergone the fast-paced changes of the Indian metropolises (see figures 8 and 9).

The *Namak* song also begins with a very identifiable idiosyncratic flourish by its lyricist, who often references the moon in his lyrics: *Main chand nigal gayi hai daiyya re* [I swallowed the moon, my goodness!]. Even though the dance sequence in the film deletes nearly a whole minute of the song, all audio versions of the song include it. The rest of the song is strewn with colloquialisms such as *tej tha tadka* [the seasoning was spicy], *phat se* [at once], *dali bhar* [large amount], along with the pronunciation of the word *ishq* [love] as *isk*, using the "s" sound instead of the "sh" sound, all of which are typical of the UP-Bihar, northern-rural belt of India. Gulzar is particularly known for juxtaposing such commonly used terms with high Urdu in his poetry. Furthermore, Bhardwaj's music underscores this regional variation in the rhythm and the use of different pitches in the song. The audience's pleasure would include a recognition of the regional elements as well as the literary

and poetic flourishes of the song. The lines of this song also contain images and phrases that extend beyond the context of the song: *Sabhi cheden hain mujhko, sipahiye baanke chamiye / udhaari dene lagen hain, gali ke baniye baniye* [Everyone teases me, these policemen romantic gentlemen . . . I am getting loans from all the merchants down my street]. The shift from the *zamindaraana* (feudal) system to semi-urban manifestations of capitalism has imposed its own chains of command and exploitations.

These nuances of the backdrop and the various cultural-historical sources that the songs draw upon get lost in cursory readings. Both the songs and resultant readings would benefit from being analyzed with a much closer eye to detail and history, taking into account their inconsistencies, the oscillations between realism, star appeal, recognition of stylistic flourishes, and the fulfilment of generic expectations, all of which can be identified as crucial elements in the pleasure such songs generate.

The songs' relationship with the narrative is not "logical," but they inflect the narrative in specifically visual ways. The *Beedi* song, for example, is preceded by two complementary scenes of commitment between the two couples, Billo and Kesu and Dolly and Omkara. Kesu proposes to Billo and is laughingly brushed off by her, while Omkara gives Dolly a heavy metal waist ornament, studded with jewels and layered with filigreed chains, which is the equivalent of the handkerchief in *Othello*. In *Othello*, the handkerchief is a gift from his mother, ostensibly memorializing his parents' personal romance, while within its delicate folds lurks a darker cultural history. Similarly, in *Omkara*, the waistband's elaborately wrought glittering surface conceals a complicated history. It is a family heirloom from his father's side of the family. Omkara's mother's claim to the heirloom is tenuous because she is not his father's "legitimate" wife, which is also why Omkara is considered a "half-caste" in his community. It is a family heirloom that carries with it the burden of tradition and family honor, as Omkara explicitly and proudly points out to Dolly, exhorting her to keep it with care. This is particularly ironic, as his own mother, who is considered a "prostitute" by his father's legitimate family, is excluded from the tradition that Omkara inherits and finally perpetuates in his treatment of Dolly. In the middle of the rambunctious song-and-dance sequence of the *Beedi* song, the camera cuts to an intimate scene between Dolly and Omkara, tracking Dolly's silent walk down towards the bed, wearing the waist ornament for the first time as Omkara gazes at her, anticipating their first love scene. At this early point in the film, the intercutting, exterior shots of Billo as the object of desire, surrounded by a crowd of men, and the interior ones of Dolly, as the object of Omkara's gaze, serve to highlight their contrasting positions. Yet, such visual juxtapositions inevitably suggest an underlying comparison that gradually gathers force by the end of the film.

The waist ornament is, once again, positioned visually at the center of Billo's second song-and-dance track. She is sent as a decoy to the police station to trap the members of a rival gang that is plotting against Bhaisahib. She wears the waistband that Kesu has given her, and Omkara recognizes it immediately as he comes into the police station disguised as a police officer. The numerous shots of her waist, framed by the waistband, amongst a crowd of policemen with their eyes trained on her and lusting after her, provide a visual symbol of female sexuality, both exploited as well as literally policed (see figure 10), as she dances against the background of a rather appropriately named "control room" (transliterated in Hindi, see figure 11) in the police headquarters.

Omkara, disguised as a police officer "looking" at Billo, finds the "ocular proof" of Dolly's guilt and visually participates in the exploitation at this turning point in the film, as the sexual pleasure of "looking" takes on the darker hue of "policing," triggering the film's escalation into violence. This becomes clearer in the scene immediately following the song when Langda Tyagi regales his group with crude details about how he had been a reluctant witness to Billo and Kesu's lovemaking, when Billo had been wearing nothing but the waistband in bed. For Omkara — who has just seen Billo wearing that ornament in the song, thus confirming his suspicions about Dolly's affair with Kesu — Billo becomes interchangeable with Dolly. Both Tyagi and the audience are keenly aware of this as Tyagi plays his psychological game with Omkara in front of his gang. Omkara's demand for "ocular proof" has just been satisfied by Tyagi's lewd narrative, which intertwines Billo's and Dolly's sexuality, perverting both of them in the process. The various elements of "looking," involving pleasure, perversion, and violence, coalesce here with the gradual erasure of the difference between the onlookers, identified here as the male crowd, Langda, Tyagi, and Omkara. This association of the male characters is anticipated visually in the *Namak* song when Langda Tyagi and Omkara, disguised as cops, merge with the dancing crowd at the end of the song.

*Omkara* effects an important visual register shift when it transforms Desdemona's handkerchief into a heavy and elaborate waistband. The beautiful, ostentatious symbol passes through several hands in the film and is present in various scenes in the movie, gathering, in the process, a range of associations about female sexuality, its perversion, and the ominous aspects of its monitoring in the name of tradition and familial honor. The waistband is worn by all three of the women in consequential and highlighted shots in the film and is particularly central to both the song-and-dance sequences. In this sense, the dance sequences themselves can be viewed as microcosms of the film-watching experience, in which the dancing Billo and the waistband become interchangeable objects of desire, both celebrating the audience's pleasure and reflecting its darker desire to control the object of pleasure, a desire that can easily escalate into violence and destruction.

Bhardwaj's adaptation gains strength from presenting closely observed visual details of clothing, customs, and architecture and through its use of shockingly crude, rustic language that evokes a very specific socio-cultural milieu. This intensely realized milieu is closely structured on *Othello's* plot and is interspersed with linguistic equivalences from the Shakespearean text, along with other extant cultural and religious practices of India, which are made to inform contemporary gender concerns and thus provide immediacy to the plot. The songs and dances in the film function tantalizingly on the outskirts of the logic of the plot, incorporating contending elements of region-specific "realism," generic coding, star power, glamor, and commercial and artistic investment while bearing the distinct signature of the lyricist and the auteur-director. Operating through parallel logic and holding these disparate elements in tension, they provide a familiar site that both gratifies the audience's expectations and interrogates that pleasure.

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