

Nobility, Interrupted: The Queer Poetics of Vandana Kataria's *Noblemen*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of noble kinship in *Noblemen*, Vandana Kataria's adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*. *Noblemen* is a 2019 Indian independent film written during the apex of gay decriminalization discourse in India. While Bollywood adaptations of Shakespeare have been well studied, independent films such as *Noblemen* that "speak back" to mainstream regimes of cinema and culture demand more attention. The film transforms the Christian Venetian setting of Shakespeare's play to that of an all-boys boarding school in India dubbed "Mount Noble High." I argue that the film depicts male dominated kinship networks that oppress queer difference to emphasize how mainstream kinship perpetuates and reinforces an oppressive and monolithic "imagined community." Kataria transplants the oppressive kinship apparent in *The Merchant of Venice* to *Noblemen*'s Noble High to emphasize how kinship networks' discrimination, particularly homophobia, results in an imagined community bonded by corrupt nobility and erasure of marginalized identity. Such kinship networks force Shay, Kataria's Shylock, to renounce his queer identity and convert to a position of subordination. Shay is only able to escape this subordination and exact revenge against the bullies by enacting the lawful role of Portia. This victory, however, fails to restore his nobility as it further ingratiates him in societal structures that reinforce oppression and heteronormativity. By showing how mainstream noble kinship is built upon a foundation of oppression rather than virtue, Kataria encourages audiences to question the virtue of laws, societal practices, and Bollywood films that reinforce imagined community by marginalizing queerness.



There is a dearth of scholarship on independent Indian films, and more specifically, queer independent Indian film appropriations of Shakespeare. While Bollywood film adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare

have been well studied and hold an important place in Indian cinematic culture, Bollywood does not encapsulate the entirety of Indian cinema. Varsha Panjwani argues that Shakespeare's authorial self-references give power to Indian auteurs adapting his works by providing a framework to highlight their own voice in their cinematic craft (2018, 180). Similarly, Mark Thornton Burnett suggests that Shakespeare is often used by Indian auteurs to enhance their global recognition (2013, 57). By neglecting Indie film adaptations of Shakespeare, scholarship thus overlooks auteurs that use the power of Shakespeare's global recognition to highlight their own independent voices, voices that often speak back to oppressive regimes. Vandana Kataria's 2019 film *Noblemen* is one such indie film that demands further study. The film includes widely relevant themes of bullying and homophobia. This topicality, paired with the film's availability on the global platform Netflix, extends the breadth of *Noblemen's* message and political impact to Indian and worldwide audiences. From this global platform, *Noblemen* speaks against regimes that condone and perpetuate queer oppression.

Noblemen transforms the temporal and spatial setting of the early modern *Merchant of Venice* into a contemporary all-boys boarding school in India. While Shakespeare's Shylock is ostracized from Christian society due to his Jewishness and moneylending practices, Kataria's Shay is cast as different from his fellow students, the titular Noblemen, due to his queerness and love of theatre. Through his queer-coded love of theatre, however, Shay attains the coveted role of Bassanio in the upcoming school production of *The Merchant of Venice*. This small admission into the school society draws the ire of the hypermasculine school elites, Arjun/Antonio and Baadal/Bassanio, who bully Shay into relinquishing the part of the noble Bassanio. Shay then calls upon the power of law to punish the Noblemen. With a mastery over law more attributed to Portia than Shylock, Shay tricks the Noblemen into assaulting the school drama teacher, Murali. Shay himself then kills Murali and frames the Noblemen as murderers. By turning her queer Shylock into the bullied antihero of the film, Kataria champions Shylock as an oppressed person forced into the role of villain. Kataria herself asserts in online articles that "Shylock is one of the most tragic heroes" (Khandelwal 2019), and that Shay's eventual triumph against the bullies shows a situation "Where good wins over evil, but only after it becomes evil itself" (Bhalla 2019). For Shay to thus defeat the Noblemen, he must forgo his queer goodness and appropriate the Noblemen's corrupted nobility.

I argue that the film's depiction of male dominated kinship networks that oppress queer difference emphasizes how mainstream kinship perpetuates and reinforces a monolithic "imagined community." I borrow the term "imagined community" from Benedict Anderson, who defines nation as "an imagined political community . . . both limited and sovereign" (1983, 5). Imagined communities bond diverse peoples under the label of shared national identity, which in turn implies shared traits and values. Smaller-scale communities such as high schools can also act as imagined communities, or can act as smaller-scale models of their respective nations (Shircliff, Dorn, and Cobb-Roberts 2006, 2). Kataria uses Noble High's imagined community to speak against queer discrimination in India, a nation that, like other imagined communities, is "made possible by . . . heterosexual kinship arrangements" (Otto 2018, 241). The film's indie medium, which grants freer speech than mainstream cinematic mediums, gives Kataria more space to speak against the marginalization of queer people

in India. The need for such queer activism is emphasized in that *Noblemen* was filmed during the apex of gay decriminalization discourse in India. Kataria thus transforms Shylock into a figure of queer struggle to increase empathy for queer people victimized by contemporary Indian society and laws.

Drawing from kin's definition as a "people, nation, tribe" (*OED*, sv. "kin," n.1), I use the term "kinship" broadly throughout this paper to reference mainstream social groups and institutions that promote a shared sense of imagined community. In particular, I use kinship to reference homosocial networks such as Shakespeare's Venetian Christians, Noble High's Noblemen, the media institution of Bollywood, and institutions of law. These kinship networks oppress queer people that deviate from imagined communal traits to maintain order and "perpetuate the belief" in "imagined communities" (Rajgp01 2011, 241).

Before delving into the *Noblemen's* depiction of corrupt kinship, I discuss the film's appropriative engagement with *The Merchant of Venice* as well as its critique of Bollywood films that promote India as a monolithic nation. Then, I show how Kataria transplants the oppressive kinship apparent in *The Merchant of Venice* to *Noblemen's* Noble High to emphasize how kinship networks' discrimination, particularly homophobia, results in an imagined community bonded by corrupt nobility and erasure of marginalized identity. Lastly, I show how in appropriating the power of law, Shay, like Portia, gains victory by reinforcing kinship systems that marginalize difference and maintain homogeneity. By showing how mainstream noble kinship is built upon a foundation of oppression rather than virtue, Kataria encourages audiences to question the virtue of laws, societal practices, and Bollywood films that reinforce imagined community by marginalizing queerness.

NOBLEMEN AS INDIE APPROPRIATION

Kataria largely appropriates rather than strictly adapts *The Merchant of Venice* to emphasize *Noblemen's* stance against kinship institutions that oppress queerness. *Noblemen's* status as an appropriation is evidenced by the "divergence" of plot, script, medium, and setting from Shakespearean fidelity to create a "wholly new cultural product" (Sanders 2015, 35). Shakespearean appropriations such as *Noblemen* are rebellious in that they disrupt the often-hierarchical notions of "authorship" and Shakespeare as cultural capital (Desmet 1999, 16). Furthermore, they often create a space in which "the relation between Self and Other is worked out" (Desmet, 1999, 18). This attention to the issues of self-identity and otherness are evident when Kataria's film is more interested in looking at the issues of hypermasculinity and queer oppression occurring alongside the school's performance of *The Merchant of Venice* than at the performance alone. Her choice to appropriate rather than adapt Shakespeare grants her film the space and agency needed to speak out against the film's contextual homophobic regimes.

Kataria appropriates Shakespeare's Shylock, Launcelot Gobbo, and Portia as oppressed queer others to emphasize the widespread harm caused by mainstream Indian kinship's queer oppression. Shylock, Gobbo, and Portia are portrayed respectively as Noble High's queer group of outcasts: Shay, Ganzu, and Pia. While only

Shay is explicitly queer under the definition of homosexuality, his group of friends might be classified as queer due to their being “strange,” “eccentric,” and “suspicious” in the eyes of Noble High society (*OED*, sv. “queer” adj.1). Kataria’s portrayal of Shay being victimized alongside others contrasts with Shakespeare’s portrayal of Shylock’s isolated victimhood. This suggests that Noble High’s perceived homogeneity is threatened not just by the occasional social outcast, but by wider groups of people considered to be queer or different. Kataria’s transformation of Gobbo and Portia into queer social others emphasizes the imagined nature of monolithic kinship.

Kataria’s appropriation of Shylock as a figure of queer oppression draws from the wide tradition of Shylock’s affiliation with themes of oppression in contemporary and global adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice*. Adam Meyer argues that Shylock takes on the charged role of either victim or villain in African American authored adaptations; he either becomes a figure emblematic of oppression against African Americans or a villainous “exploitative Jewish businessman” (2012, 3, 10). Avraham Oz fittingly dubs Shylock’s character as “nomadic” because of his lack of background and community roots with the Venetians (2020, 146). Shylock’s “nomadic” nature makes him easily adapted to many different temporal and spatial contexts, as well as easily appropriated to speak against racial, religious, and as is the case for *Noblemen*, queer oppression.

Kataria’s appropriating Shakespeare for queer activism follows the trend of Indian Shakespeare adaptations and appropriations speaking back to oppressive regimes. Ania Loomba argues that Shakespeare has become highly marketable in India and global culture through holistic depictions of “both once-colonized and once-colonizing cultures,” suggesting that Shakespearean adaptations show holistic depictions of colonialism rather than blind adherence to imperial countries (2007, 122). In agreement, Gitanjali Shahani and Brinda Charry assert that the relationship between Bollywood and Shakespeare is “fraternal as opposed to the wholly imperial paternal” (2014, 162). Politically charged Indian adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare therefore are not necessarily reacting against Shakespeare, but rather using the agency of Shakespeare to react against other issues.

Kataria does not position Shakespearean theatre as a corrupt paternal authority looming over Bollywood, but rather Bollywood as a powerful institution that threatens to appropriate Shakespearean sources to reinforce its own power. This can be seen early in the film, when Baadal tries to bribe Murali, the school drama teacher, for the role of Bassanio using his father’s Bollywood connections and financial resources. Murali, however, denies the bribe by responding: “You do realize this is Shakespeare, not a Bollywood film.” Murali positions Shakespearean drama as separate from Bollywood and protects it from Bollywood’s powerful influence by denying the bribe. As a teacher of queer stigmatized theatre, Murali might be seen as a part of the school’s queer alt-community. His production of *The Merchant of Venice* provides a platform that supports queer, theatre-loving students such as Shay. Baadal, however, through his Bollywood bribery, threatens to encroach upon Murali’s establishment of Shakespearean theatre as a queer-friendly space.

Kataria's association of Bollywood with corrupt bribery might speak to how Bollywood films, and in turn Bollywood Shakespeares, often reinforce a "monolithic image of the nation" (Rajgopal 2011, 240). Bollywood film creators and actors have somewhat limited agency in voicing dissent against Indian institutions that often discriminate between "who really belongs to [India] and who does not . . . even Bollywood actors need to be careful not to raise the ire of politicians, especially if they belong to a minority themselves" (Rajgopal 2011, 240). Kunal Kapoor, who plays Murali, and is a Bollywood star himself, has spoken against the issue of Bollywood reinforcing an oppressive monolithic image of India by criticizing Bollywood's tendency of "propagating" queer stereotypes (IANS 2016). Kapoor has even turned down Bollywood roles that portrayed queerness offensively (IANS 2016). Indian audiences watching *Noblemen* might have recalled Kapoor's widely known allyship with the LGBT community, as well as his denigration of Bollywood homophobia, and seen his involvement in the film as a bid for queer acceptance. While some Bollywood films and Bollywood actors like Kapoor sometimes speak against mainstream regimes and Bollywood homophobia, the Bollywood industry largely promotes heteronormativity and demotes queerness monolithic kinship (Ganti 2013, 113). Baadal's Bollywood connections thus suggest that his securing the role of Bassanio would reinforce this legacy of oppression, transforming Shakespearean theatre into a platform that denigrates, rather than welcomes, queer difference.

Alternatively, Indie auteurs adapting Shakespeare have more free speech to speak against homophobia, although their smaller budgets might limit their artistic agency. Sharat Katariya's indie film *10ml Love*, which adapts Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, explores an Indian auteur's struggle to balance between "money and artistic freedom" through its depiction of *Ramlila* troupes struggling to come up with funds and subsequently declining (Panjwani 2018; 191–83). Kataria's *Noblemen* similarly self-references the financial plight of an Indian auteur through Murali, a high school teacher with limited financial means. That both the real-life Kapoor and the fictional Murali stand against Bollywood's corrupt financial influence speaks to an auteur's power to stand against oppressive kinship networks.

NOBLE HIGH SCHOOLERS AND NOBLE CHRISTIANS

By titling her film "*Noblemen*," Kataria guides audiences to reflect on the meaning of nobility within imagined kinship networks in the film, in its antecedent *The Merchant of Venice*, and in India. As the school is dubbed "Mount Noble High," in the context of the film, being a nobleman signifies being a member of the Mount Noble High community and thus having in-group status. The title's use of "men" versus "man" suggests the inherent status of a noble person in the film as part of a plurality. Shay seeks to become an accepted member of Noble High by pursuing the role of noble Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* production to be performed on the school's Founder's Day. The school's principal proclaims that Founder's Day grants the "opportunity for each and every [student] to shine and spread [the] greatest Noble High traditions." While Shay's love of theatre habitually marks him as a queer deviant, his inclusion in *The Merchant of Venice* production should allow him

to become a part of Noble High's imagined community while retaining his queer identity. Shay's acceptance within this imagined community would imply his future acceptance within the Indian nation.

The Merchant of Venice establishes nobility not through school relationships, but through Christian kinship. While Shay seeks nobility through playing Bassanio, it is notable that "noble" is used just twice in relation to Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*. The first use of the word "noble" in the play aligns with its use in the sense "of birth, blood, and family" (*OED*, sv. "noble," adj. and n.1). In the first scene of the play in which Bassanio asks for a loan from Antonio, Salanio refers to Bassanio as Antonio's "most noble kinsman," (1.1.160) thus associating the word "noble" with Bassanio's kinship with Antonio.¹ The "noble kinsman" Bassanio, however, also uses the word to describe wealth. Bassanio recounts the loss of his previous wealth as being "abridged / From such a noble rate" (1.1.134). The use of "noble" to modify "rate" suggests that Bassanio sees nobility as a quantifier of commercial value. This line occurs in the same scene in which Bassanio is referred to as a "noble kinsman," thus drawing attention to the use of noble to describe both kinship and wealth. This reveals the tentative virtue of being "noble" and of the supposed nobility of kinship. While Salanio defines Bassanio as a noble kinsman, the supposedly "noble kinsman" himself fixates on nobility's association with money.

Bassanio undermines the idea of Christian kinship bonded through honorable nobility by expanding the use of noble to refer to wealth rather than just masculine friendship. The inclusion of money or self-promotion threatened to breach the nobility of early modern homosocial bonds (Patterson 1999, 24). Early modern masculine friendships could be said to involve sodomy when used for exploitative or mercenary means (Bray 2003, 183–93). Scholars have noted the inclusion of deviant exploitation in what is meant to be a virtuous kinship between Antonio and Bassanio. Seymour Kleinberg describes Bassanio's actions in the first scene as "the yoking of love and money," asserting that Bassanio is exploiting Antonio's clear affections for him (1983, 117). Amy Greenstadt argues that Bassanio's "false-friendship" is revealed when he promises to repay Antonio, thus showing a denial of "the total physical and emotional merger Antonio offers with his purse and person" (2013, 951). Alternatively, Eliza Greenstadt asserts that "Antonio breaks the codes of masculine friendship, by entrapping Bassanio in emotional debt" (2017, 199). While scholars have different perceptions of who is the offender and who is the victim of exploitation, exploitation certainly takes place in this supposedly exemplary noble bond.

Defining Mount Noble high school by nobility makes it apparent that the noble kinship of the student body is shaded by a similar corruption. The sanctity of noble kinship in *Noblemen*, as in *The Merchant of Venice*, is marked by exploitation. While Antonio and Bassanio's kinship network is defined by its members' shared status as noble Christians, Mount Noble High defines what it means to be a Nobleman, and thus what it means to be a part of the school community, through its core values. The core of being a Nobleman is "strength, courage, and truth." Arjun, Kataria's adapted Antonio, is the first to bring up these core values. In an act of masculine performance, Arjun stands atop a table in the school cafeteria and addresses the students as "noble-

1 All references to William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* are from the Folger Shakespeare Text online edition, edited by Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine.

men, and nobler women.” He points to the school crest on the wall and asks: “what does that say?” to which the crowd enthusiastically responds “truth, courage, strength.”



Figure 1. Arjun points to the school crest while standing on a cafeteria table in *Noblemen* (Yoodlee Films 2019, 1:17).

He then haughtily proclaims “let’s start from me,” and announces his acceptance into the state football team, a badge of his masculine prowess. This interaction shows that Arjun is the pinnacle of what it means to be a Nobleman of Mount Noble High. As *The Merchant of Venice* is titled after Antonio, the title “*Noblemen*” similarly defines Arjun. Arjun has encultured *The Merchant of Venice’s* noble definition of kinship by garnering full support from the cheering cafeteria crowd. Furthermore, he seems to encapsulate the courage and strength of the school’s core values through his hypermasculine confidence and athletic ability. Arjun’s showmanship in this scene, while theatrical, likens him to a Bollywood film star. Just as Bollywood stars reinforce India’s imagined heteronormative kinship, Arjun reinforces Noble High’s imagined monolithic traits of nobility and masculinity.

As was the case with noble kinship in *The Merchant of Venice*, however, the honorable nature of Noble High’s nobility is exposed as a farce. Arjun’s hostile and fragmented performance of nobility reveals that he lacks the noble quality of “truth” as outlined by the school’s core values. He leers at the crowd and asks, “which lucky boy is going to show me some strength and some courage tonight.” Arjun verbalizes strength and courage, but he conveniently leaves out the third school value of truth. As Arjun, like a Bollywood film protagonist, is

meant to exemplify the nobility of Noble High's imagined community, his omission suggests that the school's noble identity is marked by deceit. By calling attention to the school's deceitful identity through Arjun's performance Kataria reflects the deceitful nature of imagined communities, and particularly, the deceitfulness of Bollywood's heteronormative nationalistic propaganda (Rajgopal 2011, 240–41).

The corrupt nature of nobility that bonds, and is promoted by, mainstream kinship networks is further evidenced by Arjun's subsequent practice of exploitation. He assesses the crowd, calling each boy he passes a "wimp" until he comes to Shay. When he reaches Shay, he stops, saying, "lucky little Shay." He then crouches down towards him and says, "do it for me tonight." Arjun gives Shay a wad of money to buy drugs for him and his friends. The public nature of this action encompasses Shay, Arjun, and the Noble High community watching the scene in a shared bond of exploitation. Arjun pats Shay on the shoulder as if the interaction were one of kinship rather than abuse. This reflects how those within kinship communities "conceive" of them as a "deep, horizontal comradeship" despite "actual inequality and exploitation" (Anderson 1983, 7). Arjun, like Shakespeare's Christian merchants, masks the exploitation present in his interaction with Shay, instead promoting his actions as facets of "horizontal," kinship.

Choosing Shay as the object of exploitation serves to simultaneously stigmatize him and incorporate him into the noble community. As the object of Arjun's torment, Shay is stigmatized as different from the rest of his peers. Routinely bullied for being perceived as queer, Shay is an easy target. Arjun refers to him as "lucky little Shay," thus asserting him as someone smaller, less strong, and less noble than himself. Shay, however, is also ingratiated into Arjun's noble kinship by being Arjun's "lucky" chosen. Arjun designates him as worthy of lending courage and strength for the sake of the school's most prestigious nobleman. He coerces Shay into aiding him without reward, thus simultaneously mimicking the interest-free loans between Antonio and Bassanio and Antonio and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. Just as free lending in *The Merchant of Venice* constitutes kinship, Arjun's request puts Shay in a position of kinship with Arjun (Greenstadt 2013, 946). Alfredo Modenessi argues that a similar obsession with male honor can be seen in *Omkara*, in which "honor" is stressed more than the "nobility" of its "moors" (2012, 3). This male-associated honor, like the corrupt nobility of hypermasculine kinship promoted by Arjun and his noblemen as well as Bollywood, is embedded with systemic violence (Modenessi 2012, 3).

ERASURE THROUGH CONVERSION

In the first half of the film, Shay occupies the liminal space of being both Shylock and Bassanio. He is the ostracized Shylock through his queer deviancy from his peers, but also the noble Bassanio through his role in the school play that signals his status as the film's protagonist. Scholars have argued that Antonio has a queer bond with both Shylock and Bassanio. Shay's occupation with both characters thus heightens his potentially queer connection to Arjun. In addition, Arjun's targeting of Shay, the most prominent queer figure in the school, connects him to Shay's queerness. Anthony Guy Patricia writes that the cross-cutting shots between

Antonio and Bassanio in Michael Radford's 2004 *The Merchant of Venice* portray that Antonio "only has eyes for Bassanio," thus conveying their queer connection in the film (Patricia 2016, 142). Cross cutting also occurs as Shay and Arjun stare into each other's eyes when Arjun hands him the drug money, thus showing its similar usage as a tool of homoerotic connection. Both a monetary and an emotional exchange occurs, catalyzing the link that will connect Shay and Arjun.

By having Shay occupy both characters, Kataria implies that Shay has the potential to become one of Arjun's Noblemen. Shay's queerness and adherence to his queer love of theatre, however, bar him from acceptance into the school's supposedly noble kinship. Ironically, Shay's bravely pursuing his true, queer passion for theatre despite the social stigma suggests that he, more so than Arjun, encapsulates the school's promoted values of truth, courage, and strength. The homophobia rampant in the school's hypermasculine culture, however, ensures that Shay's truly noble qualities go unrecognized. In associating Shay's queerness with noble resilience, Kataria shows that the Noblemen's homophobia severs Noble High from true nobility.

The film's depiction of a high school rampant with homophobic bullying largely unchecked by school authorities speaks to the widespread queer oppression in Indian boarding schools during this period. Sociologist Sanjay Srivastata argues that Indian all-boy boarding schools have largely "produced and refined" masculine cultures associated with gender violence (2013). The bullying of queer individuals by teachers and fellow students is a consistent problem and one that school administrations are often unwilling to openly discuss (Srivastata and Dudeja, 2020). Kataria uses the widely recognized homophobia and hypermasculinity within Indian boarding schools to speak to how imagined kinship promotes oppressive traits to erase sources of difference.

Kinship simultaneously oppressing difference and reinforcing homogeneity is evidenced in how the bullying continues to both designate Shay as a queer other and integrate him into the society of Mount Noble's Noblemen. Arjun and Baadal command Shay to run drills in an attempt to force him to relinquish his part in the play. After threatening to break Shay's legs, Arjun wraps his arms around Shay from behind and whispers into his ear "You broke the code son." Arjun's calling Shay his "son" builds from his previous description of Shay as "lucky little Shay," which similarly qualified Shay as young and small. Furthermore, it positions Arjun as the mature father and Shay as the infantile "son." Arjun's threatening, hugging, and whispering to Shay from behind creates a mixture of intimacy and violence evocative of pederastic kinship. Arjun's actions might reflect "the pederast's deadly effort to reproduce himself in his young beloved, turning the beloved into an object that reflects only the pederast" (Amin 2017, 132). Arjun seeks to transform Shay into a version of himself, a representative of Noble High's corrupt kinship. Even Shay's punishment of running drills might be seen as an attempt to transform Shay's body into the masculine, athletic body of a football or Bollywood star. Arjun's pederastic self-replication, however, would in turn kill Shay, the "beloved," as an "autonomous individual" (Amin 2017, 132). For Shay to thus become a part of Arjun's kinship community, his old self, which is defined by his queerness, passion for theatre, and noble resilience, must die.

That both Shay and Shylock are forced to renounce their identities, their noble personal truths, and adopt mainstream kinship values against their will reflects how kinship networks reinforce imagined communities by erasing difference. After the trial, Antonio demands that Shylock “presently become a Christian” (4.1.402). The Duke asserts that “He shall do this, or else I do recant / The pardon that I late pronouncèd here” (4.1.407–8). Under the threat of death, Shylock agrees to the conversion, and exits *The Merchant of Venice* sick, emasculated, and forced to renounce his Jewish identity. Through this new Christian status, he is spiritually linked in kinship with his tormentors. Shylock’s true homogenization into Christian society is impossible, as he will always be marked as separate because of his Jewish heritage (Adelman 2003, 10; Metzger 1998, 58–59). While Shylock may be a Christian, he will never be treated as a Christian equal. This shows that Shylock’s conversion both perpetually binds and subordinates him to Christian kinship. He can no longer retain agency through the separateness of his individual spirituality.

Shay is similarly forced to renounce the role of Bassanio under the threat of abuse. Arjun, with the help of his Noblemen cronies, captures and sexually assaults Shay. Arjun uses a suntan lotion bottle to perform the assault, thus disassociating his own sexual identity from the homoerotic nature of his sexual violence. This allows him and his Noblemen to adhere to their own hypermasculine kinship standards. After the assault, Arjun puts his hand to Shay’s lips to remove the ball and gag from his mouth. He puts his arm around Shay and speaks slowly, quietly into his ear “You okay? . . . Hm? . . . If we keep this as a secret, we can be friends . . . forever.” After the assault, Arjun uses “we” to merge Shay’s identity with his own. So long as Shay keeps the secret, he can be a part of Arjun’s “we.” Arjun not offering an alternative option implies the threat of future violence if his demands are not met. Just as Shylock is subordinately linked to the Christians who threatened his death, Shay will be subordinately linked to the Noblemen who raped him.

While Arjun’s actions match those of Antonio, his phrasing is more reminiscent of Shylock’s. Shylock says when offering the initial deal to Antonio: “I would be friends with you and have your love, / Forget the shames that you have stained me with . . . This is kind I offer” (1.3.149–54). Arjun’s assertion “we can be friends” recalls Shylock’s “I would be friends with you and have your love.” Furthermore, Arjun asserting that “we keep this as a secret” is suggestive of forgetting the assault, thus mirroring “forget the shames that you have stained me with.” Shylock offers both his friendship and his kinship to Antonio in this initial deal (Greenstadt 2013, 946). Unlike Antonio’s demand for Shylock’s conversion at the end of the play, there is no threat of force, and furthermore, Shylock does not require that Antonio convert to Judaism for them to be kin so long as Antonio repays his debt (Greenstadt 2013, 946). Arjun’s “we can be friends” thus carries the same violent weight of Antonio’s forced conversion of Shylock even if his language is taken from Shylock. Kataria highlights the paradox between preached Christian kindness and practiced Christian cruelty by having Arjun use the language of Shylock’s “kind” offer for a villainous purpose. Arjun becomes the villain not through his commonalities with Shylock, but his differences from Shylock. In making this comparison, Kataria implies that Antonio, a figure of oppressive Christian power, is the true villain of Shakespeare’s play. So long as Shay accepts Arjun’s demands, just as Shylock accepts Antonio’s demands, Shay can gain the protection of being a part of Arjun’s

monolithic “we.” Just like Shylock, therefore, Shay must renounce his queer nobility and visibility, his honest love of theatre, and his role as Bassanio, to escape the abuse of the Noblemen.

The film’s Shakesporean stage is no longer appropriated, as Murali desired, to support students like Shay with an honest, queer love of theatre. Instead, Baadal, who is linked to both Noble High and Bollywood kinship networks, secures the role of Bassanio. This shift in lead casting suggests that the school’s Shakesporean stage will be led in a Bollywoodesque direction which promotes an oppressive, monolithic imagined community. That Baadal’s securing the role of Bassanio restores the Noble High norms, specifically the norm of picking a lead based upon upperclassman status rather than merit, further suggests that restoration of order within Noble High’s imagined community is concomitant with oppressive hierarchies.

NOBLE PORTIA AND NOBLE SHAY

After Shay loses his role and partial identity as the noble Bassanio through his forced conversion, he takes on the noble guise of Portia, a character routinely associated with law and justice. Shay appropriating Portia’s lawful power being concomitant with his transformation into the film’s villain in the latter half of the film emphasizes how law functions as an oppressive kinship institution. Law, like other supposedly noble kinship institutions, maintains imagined homogeneity through oppressing difference. While “noble” in *The Merchant of Venice* is first used to reference Bassanio, it is more often used by and in relation to Portia. “Noble” is used in relation to Bassanio twice. Portia is referred to and uses the word “noble” five times. Shay and Portia are both barred full access to the nobility of male homosocial kinship networks, Shay through his queerness and Portia because she is a woman. Despite Portia’s lack of full access to Christian kinship networks, she can participate in male Christian society through her manipulation of the law. Shay is similarly able to overcome his marginalized status as a converted Shylock by using the law to defeat the Noblemen and erase the evidence of his queerness.

Kataria might have likened Shay to the lawful Portia to comment upon contemporary Indian discourse on laws against queerness. Early modern England and contemporary India up to 2018 shared similar laws against the act of sodomy. The Indian Penal Code 377 of 1860 was passed under the British regime and modeled after British anti-sodomy laws, the first of which was the Buggery Act of 1533 (Kirby 2013, 62, 66). On the surface, IPC 377, like the Buggery Act, targeted a broadly defined sodomy which included any sexual act that might threaten the normative social order. (Bray 1990, 2–3). In practice, however, IPC 377 was used most often to target homosexual sex. Ruth Vanita asserts that India was much more tolerant of homosexuality before the act was passed, showing that the imposition of homophobic law codes served to implant oppressive imperial values upon Indian mainstream culture (32). The debate over IPC 377 was at the height of public attention during the film’s production and was repealed only after the film released its first official teaser (Krishnadas 2018). Shay’s queer status in *Noblemen* marks him as deviant and a threat to a school society that still conforms to heteronormative imperial laws. That Shay only defeats the Noblemen and secures justice by adopting Por-

tia's skillful manipulation of the law—a manipulation which thwarted Shylock and maintained the vitality of noble Christian kinship—suggests that law serves to maintain imagined communities rather than to protect those residing within them.

Though Portia is often lauded as one of Shakespeare's strongest women, she is only able to harness lawful power and achieve victory through acting as a man. Portia's nobility is often associated with her male disguise as a judge, which enables her to act within male structures from which she is typically barred. Shylock twice calls her "noble judge" after the instances in which Portia leads on Antonio's fears in the courtroom scene. She says to Antonio: "You must prepare your bosom for the knife" (4.1.255), and later "Therefore lay bare your bosom." (4.1.262). Shylock perceives the disguised Portia as noble when she pretends to lawfully uphold Shylock's bloody retribution. But, rather than acting as the "noble judge" implementing Shylock's desired justice, Portia allows Antonio to escape his bond with Shylock. Ellen M. Caldwell avers that Portia's control of the law makes her the "shrewdest merchant" (2014, 335, 365). Portia's ability to secure lawful power only through a male disguise and a renunciation of her female identity implies that Shay similarly must forgo his identity of queerness to secure control of the law.

Portia is also granted the ability to control the court and to act as a male judge through her own kinship connections. She uses her familial kinship network, her cousin Doctor Bellario, to gain the "notes and garments" (3.4.52) needed to disguise herself as a judge. While Portia is often barred access to male homosocial kinship, her familial proximity to a Doctor of Law allows her to enter male-dominated spaces. Portia's "noble and true conceit / Of godlike amity" (3.4.23), her noble appreciation for the "godlike amity" of male kinship, is made most possible through the masculine authority granted to her familial connections to the largely male institution of law. While Portia takes covert action independent from Antonio and Bassanio's kinship, her victory is dependent on her taking advantage of her kinship relations. Portia, like the noble merchants, draws from kinship to garner power and success.

Kataria draws from Portia's appropriation of power through kinship to show how agency within imagined communities can only be secured by adopting mainstream kinship's oppressive tactics. Just as Portia establishes victory in spaces dominated by male homosocial bonds by taking the advice of her cousin Bellario, Shay is able to manipulate spaces dominated by male noble kinship by taking the advice of his mother, a former air force officer. Without telling his mother the whole truth of his situation, Shay asks her for advice on how to "make your way out" from "enemies on both sides." His mother advises "focus and distraction. Focus on your part and distract your enemies. They should get so tangled up with each other that they forget all about you." Her advice to use self-focus and distract enemies mimics the methods of Portia, who uses a male disguise to secure agency within a male-controlled society. Furthermore, Shay's mother's military experience might liken her to Portia in that she inhabited, and presumably molded herself to fit, a typically masculine role. Shay's transformation into a Nobleman thus draws from a wide legacy of feminine strategy and mimicry of masculinity.

Both Shay and Portia rely on the aid of figures ingratiated in male-dominated institutions. Though male kinship networks have oppressed both Shay and Portia in the past, they learn to appropriate the power of these networks for their own gain. That they are only able to enter masculine power networks through trickery and familial connections further emphasizes that less-than-noble exploitative practices are an inherent part of such masculine networks and that one must embrace such exploitation to join these networks. Additionally, Kataria points to the fraught nature of being included in male institutions by having Shay's mother suffer from paralysis. Though she was able to join the air force and inhabit a traditionally masculine role, her career as an air force officer resulted in permanent injury. This suggests that even those who are accepted into such networks are exposed to harm through the violence lurking in hypermasculine kinship.

Shay transforms into a corrupt Nobleman and in turn oppresses ostracized communities by using both Portia's and his mother's legal and military strategies to fulfill the main "focus," of his "part" in the latter half of the film, that part being the role of a noble and victorious Portia. Shay "distracts" others from his ostracized queer identity by falsely accusing Murali, Shay's former play director and unrequited crush, of sexual molestation. Shay later goes to Murali to express a false apology for his accusation, leading Murali to ask Shay why he lied. Shay offers the truth, that he was raped, as a form of bait. This revelation of truth leads Murali to run off to exact vengeance on the Noblemen. Shay thus adequately employs his mother's advice to get his enemies — Murali and the school Noblemen who might officially expose his queer identity — "tangled up" by pitting them against each other.

Shay bringing destruction upon both Murali and the Noblemen by turning them against each other and then calling upon the power of law to restore order reflects how law functions to maintain imagined communities. In an act of rage, Murali goes to fight the school bullies alone and loses. As discussed earlier, Murali, as well as the author who plays him, is aligned with indie authorial rebellion and queer allyship. Murali's isolation and defeat in this scene mirror how the lone indie auteur or activist is ultimately powerless against the comparative might of oppressive Bollywood kinship as represented by the Noblemen. Despite Murali's queer allyship aligning him with threatening deviance, he is still a teacher, and thus an accepted figure of authority within Noble High's imagined community. Murali's visible dissent, like the visible dissent often expressed in indie films, is more easily surveilled and controlled. His murder therefore threatens to open new, less controllable modes of dissent, thus destabilizing the thin balance of Noble High's imagined community. Accordingly, the kinship institution of law demands that Murali's murder be punished to ensure the stability and maintenance of Noble High's imagined community.

Homogeneous kinship is restored when the law condemns Arjun and his Noblemen for Murali's murder. *Noblemen* emphasizes how the law maintains kinship rather than true justice by depicting how the Noblemen, rather than Shay, who commits the final act of murder, are punished. While Shay's manipulation of the law effectively defeats the Noblemen, it is implied that his actions will result in future abuse rather than relief for queer people. In the cut following Arjun's arrest, there is a new school principal who implies a stricter future

regime when he asserts that “boys need to become men by force of law. And that law, I will implement.” His emphasis on “boys” becoming “men” suggests a continuation of institutional practices that encourage hyper-masculine values. The principal’s promise to use “force of law” to uphold these values further emphasizes the law’s function to promote oppressive kinship, and, as Kataria suggests, characterizes the school community as a “totalitarian microcosm” (Bhalla 2019). Through this “totalitarian” depiction of law, Kataria emphasizes how it functions to promote oppressive kinship, and in turn, to obstruct queer difference.

CONCLUSION: NOBLE IMPACT

Noblemen critiques the oppressive nature of noble kinships and institutions in both early modern England and contemporary India. Kataria appropriates both Bassanio’s exploitative noble kinship and Portia’s noble power over oppressive law to convey the corrupt nature of supposedly noble kinship networks. Shay becomes a part of this oppressive kinship by using Portia’s noble methods to manipulate the law. If Portia is the “shrewdest merchant” by the end of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shay proves himself to be the shrewdest Nobleman. While Shay is able to defeat the Noblemen, viewers do not leave the film feeling as if Shay has won. The new principal cancels Founders Day, and accordingly, the production of *The Merchant of Venice* which Shay once adored. Instead, the school community is to be bonded by institutional law, the same law that has outlawed sodomy in both *The Merchant of Venice’s* early modern England as well as *Noblemen’s* contemporary Indian culture. Shay’s future thus promises lawful regulation of sexuality rather than the queer expression granted through Shakespearean theatre.



Figure 2. Shay performs Bassanio’s act three scene two soliloquy to an empty audience (Yoodlee films 2019, 1:59).

In the final cut of the film, Shay partially fulfills his original dream of acting as Bassanio. He delivers Bassanio’s act three scene two soliloquy—where he mulls over which casket to choose to win the hand of Portia—on an empty stage to an empty audience. Shay’s voice fades away before finishing the soliloquy thus barring him from the victory granted to Bassanio after the completion of the speech. The emptiness of the scene reminds the film’s audience that *The Merchant of Venice* is canceled, and its director, Murali, is dead. The Shakespearean theatre that once offered Shay safe harbor is gone, emphasizing his lawful victory as a queer loss.

While Kataria has accomplished the feat of directing a film adaptation and delivering complicated criticisms of hypermasculine bonds, oppression, and Shakespearean nobility, her film has still not been granted the scholarly visibility it deserves. As *Noblemen* was recently added to Netflix, I imagine it will become more visible to wider global audiences, potentially more visible than Bollywood or even western adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice*, which are not included on the streaming platform. As *Noblemen’s* visibility grows in popular culture, its perceptions and impact should also be studied to understand the global ramifications of Shakespearean adaptation and appropriation.

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