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Race/Caste and Gender Politics: Cinematic Adaptations of Shakespeare's *Othello*

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William Shakespeare's *Othello* First Folio published 1623 continues to have socio-political relevance in the contemporary world still divided along racial and caste lines. The tragic play focuses on the fatal attraction between a Black man, General of the Venetian army, African by birth acclimatized in the European world; more "white" than "black" and Desdemona, a White woman daughter of a nobleman in Venice. Fascinated by Othello's adventurous narratives about his African past, like the Renaissance travelogues popularized by Richard Hakluyt, Samuel Purchas and accounts of Leo Africanus, she falls in love with the strange, romantic and mysterious teller of tales as any other Elizabethan audience/reader.

The play opens with their elopement and secret marriage, followed by *Charivari*: the ritualistic shaming of the couple in racist verbiage. Tensions and ruptures emerge soon enough mainly due to vested interests of Iago, Othello's trusted lieutenant. As a General deputed to fight the Turks in Cyprus, Othello reaches the alien shore only to become a "barbarian" himself, murdering his "innocent" wife in a fit of rage caused by the 'green eye'd monster'—jealousy and her imagined adultery with Cassio, a subordinate officer. The final scene focuses on the "marriage bed" luring a voyeuristic audience; dramatizing the murder as erotic violence and as part of the 'pornographic aesthetic'[1] (Boose) of the play. The 'tragic loading' of dead bodies on the bed becomes a visual representation of Eros and Thanatos, raising serious questions on race/miscegenation, class, gender, women's sexuality and domestic violence.

The recent attacks on Indian students in Australia, the killing of Dalit Sikh leader Sant Rama Nand in Vienna, the tragic death of music legend Michael Jackson (whose grotesque transformation from a black man to cosmetically recreated "white woman")—provide varied points of reference to interpret the dynamics of race and caste in multiple cultural contexts today. In the 2009 election campaigns in U.P, Chief Minister Mayawati's glorification as the 'Obama of India' created a new synergy converging categories of race, caste and gender. However, the assumption that the upper class, Brahminical authority might be a metaphor for the whites in the west is a facetious one, oblivious of the complexity of debates around 'race' and 'caste' in India.

While 'racism' and 'casteism' share histories of political, socio-economic oppression and gendered violence, 'caste' in India can not be perceived as a monolithic category. Dipankar Gupta's (2001) nuanced reading of 'caste' highlights its multiple configurations: 'brahmans do not always occupy the top spot in most hierarchies' and 'If caste politics is seen only in terms of superior brahman versus the suffering rest then the atrocities that yadavas inflict on ex-untouchables, what thevars do to pallars, and what rajputs did to the jats, would be unnoticed and brushed aside.' [2]

Shakespeare's play has topical resonances due to various kinds of 'Othering' in both western and Indian societies based on fear of miscegenation or inter-racial marriages. Apprehensions about inter-cultural mixing and hybridity have manifested in recent history in the U.S 1967 in the state of Virginia that banned inter-racial marriage. That year interestingly also witnessed the U.S Supreme Court scrapping the ban that outlawed miscegenation in 15 states. A 1991 poll conducted in the U.S., however, revealed cultural attitudes to races hadn't altered much as 42% Americans disapproved of marriage

[1]Boose, Lynda. "Othello's Handkerchief: "The Recognizance and Pledge of Love".

[2]Dipankar, Gupta. "Caste, race, politics"

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between different races—Hispanic, Black, Asian and the Whites.

Even in enlightened liberal societies today, men and women have restricted sexual and personal freedom to make marital choices that are based on egalitarianism and humanitarianism. While Iago-like people continue to serve the interests of the state as active agents of discipline and punishment in its institutionalized apparatus, acting as censors and regulators to check violation of normative ideologies on racial segregation. The patriarchal world of 16th c. Venice (also Renaissance England) constituting of Iago, Roderigo and Desdemona's father, embody the collective irrational hostility of a society whose foundations are threatened by Othello-Desdemona relationship. The play saturated with overt racial abuse and violence, however, posits a new code of man-woman relationship based on conscious choice, companionship and love. The protagonists' death subverts hegemonic notions of patriarchy, race, family and domesticity.

The storyline of the play borrowed from Giraldi Cinthio's Gli *Hecatommithi* Italian, 1565 and French translation, 1584), is about a Moor, the General of the army gulled by his lieutenant into killing his innocent wife—a white woman—suspected of being adulterous. Shakespeare's taunt, critical handling of the plot and structure expands the scope of love story, making sexual politics and gender violence linked to racial conflict as central to the design.

Actors, Masks, Setting: *Othello* and Performativity

The performative history of the play and cinematic adaptations particularly, experiment with form, actors and masks, playing upon concepts of race, class, sexual politics in cultural encounters. The twenty film adaptations of the play suggest the topicality of the theme of racial/casteist segregation and inter-racial marriages. Adaptations of the play, dramatize 'Race' in diverse ways destabilizing unified notions, contextualizing it in varied cultural spaces.

The performative potential of the play gets enhanced by Othello's ambiguous identity—What must he look like? Must he a black man or white? Resemble an African or European, Christian, Muslim or Turk? These adaptations highlight the insecurities and vulnerabilities of the hero. The cinematic visualization of Desdemona becomes equally significant in that sense. She is either a sweet faced angelic figure as in the 1995 version played by Irene Jacob, or a spirited, articulate woman who voices her protests as in Maggie Smith's powerful 1965 performance, even potentially "fallen" suggested through scenes of Irene Jacob's physical intimacy with Cassio. Dolly in the Indianized version becomes her namesake, dwindling into a simpering, doll-like woman whose muffled voice fails to articulate her anguish before murder. The song 'Soa ja guriya rani' as she lies dead punctuates her doll-like surrender and extreme passivity.

Representing the text through audio-visual images creates newer texts and intertextuality. Linda Hutcheon[3] (2006) terms 'Adaptation' as the process of 'telling and retelling stories, showing and re-showing stories, interacting and re-interacting with stories' to understand stories in newer, more radical sense in different cultural, socio-political contexts. The cinematic adaptations of the play use the basic storyline—the fatal love between racially and culturally 'other' man and woman, marriage leading to suspected adultery and wife murder. The adaptations of *Othello* use the idea of the Moor as the racially oppressed 'Other'--the alien outsider into another culture--playing upon the notion of "ambiguity" about the colour coding, race and origin of the hero. Given the intertextuality of adaptations, there is room for radicalization and re-territorialization, revision and reformulation of the original material.

The theatrical and cinematic adaptations of the play, borrow critical ideas from academia and popular imagination to contest Othello's racial ambiguity--whether he was black, white, tawny, Moor, Blackamoor, mixed race. For early critics like, Coleridge 'It would be something monstrous to conceive the beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable Negro' while A.C Bradley[4] thought him to be tawny rather than black African, questioning his biological, genetic make-up and ethnicity and the right to be the tragic hero. According to G.K Hunter (2004), colour is central to the play's design: 'the repeated references to Othello's colour in the play and the wider net of images of dark and light…show that Shakespeare was not only not unaware of the implication of his hero's colour, but was indeed intensely aware of it' and also 'he did not wish the audience to dismiss Othello as a stereotype nigger'. Theatrical adaptations from the very beginning betrayed a

[3]Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge, 2006

[4]Bradley, AC. "The Most Painfully Exciting and the Most Terrible of Shakespeare's Tragedies"

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similar anxiety about his lineage and colour. Richard Burbage, the first Othello performed in blackface, in the 18th c. actors played an Europeanized blackamoor, and finally Edmund Kean in 1814 abandoned blackface for light brown makeup, Paul Robeson the famous 20th c. Othello continued with Kean's legacy of 'Slightly tinged with walnut brown' (Kolin 2001) based on the 'cultural reasoning' that Shakespeare meant him to be a black moor from Africa of the highest nobility of heritage, not be mistaken with an African slave. When *Othello* was staged in the postbellum South, he was "whitened" due to fears of miscegenation (Kolin).

The most popular film adaptations of *Othello* include the 1952 version starring Orson Welles (directed by him), 1965 film starring Laurence Olivier directed by Stuart Burge, 1995 film starring Laurence Fishburne directed by Oliver Parker and the Indian adaptation in 2006 starring Ajay Devgan directed by Vishal Bhardwaj.

Laurence Olivier took intensive vocal training, affected a semi-African accent and performed in blackface, creating a 'relaxed, fluid body language' for the Moor and a 'self-satisfied strut'. Though his exaggerated posturing (cf. the final scene) and 'dance-like gestures' often borders on 'racist caricature'. His costume, camera placement and body language lends him an intimidating appearance. Olivier is basically a white man with blackened face, arms and body etc., in fact his artificially reddened mouth seems excessive. His performance creates racial stereotype of the black man as passionate, emphatic, violence with foot constantly in his mouth.

Parker's *Othello* promoted as an "erotic thriller" due to its brisk pace and overtly sexuality. Laurence Fishburne became 'the first black actor to play the role in a major film'. He picks up from Laurence Olivier's image of the virile, warrior-like moor, turning him into a 'sex symbol' and 'evocative of acultural figuration of the American black male in the 1990s' (Kolin 2001). The text is often rearranged in scenes with flashbacks, rich, highly graphic and intensely erotic. Othello screams 'I love thee' to Desdemona while Shakespeare's text doesn't have any public declaration of love. The film exploits the 'verbal and the unseen' creating, a series of fantasies around the original text.

Vishal Bhardwaj's 2006 Indianized adaptation of Shakespeare's play opens Pandora's Box by equating 'Caste' and 'Race' contextualizing the story in troubled political waters of Uttar Pradesh. The hero Omkara Shukla (Othello) a mongrelized half-caste falls in love with the upper caste Dolly (Desdemona) mislead by Langda Tyagi (Iago) he convinced of her adultery kills her in cold blood. By conflating racism and casteism, Bhardwaj infuses new life breath into the story, giving it contemporary relevance and a renewed understanding of public and private oppression.

The trailers of Oliver Parker's *Othello* and *Omkara* display varied social and cultural contexts, by substituting 'Race' with 'Caste', Venice, Italy with small semi-urban town in Uttar Pradesh. The trailer in Alan Parker version begins with Iago (Kenneth Branagh), the loyal servant to Othello who deliberately misleads his master into believing his wife's sexual immorality, emphatically stating: 'I hate the Moor' immediately setting off racial issues, class differences and a latent homosexual desire. Vignettes from life in small town U.P flash across the screen—goats, cheering crowds in political processions, gun toting men, marriage rituals, sexy siren Bipasha Basu doing the Bianca act. In Parker, the scenes shift rapidly from Othello's grandiose entry into Cyprus to defeat the Turks, his public declaration of love for Desdemona, scenes of romantic love and sexual jealousy with Iago playing the Machiavellian villain.

Of Slave, White Men and Othello

Shakespeare's Othello highlights racial-cultural encounters between Blacks and Whites, gesturing towards and undermining theories of 'Race' in the Elizabethan England. Set in Venice, Italy at a historical moment when Catholics were trying to gain their military stronghold on Cyprus, a tiny island, threatened by Turkish Ottoman Empire, at the height of its power (16th-17th c.) controlling three continents: Southeastern Europe, Western Asia and North Africa. Turkish power represented a real threat as between 1453 and 1571 they seized Cyprus from the Venetians and laid siege to Athens, Otranto, Rhodes, Budapest and Vienna. They dominated the Mediterranean becoming an obstacle to the eastward expansion of European economic interests.

The play highlights tensions between the Christian world and its 'Others'--the heathens, Muslims, Jews and Africans (Moors). Othello is referred to as a 'Moor', a word derived from North African language meaning 'black' later applied to people of mixed Berber and Arab race and Mohammedan religion. Brought as court entertainers, servants in royal households and slaves, Moors were marginalized in an impersonal world that took away their past and humanity. Recent research (Imtiaz Habib) suggests that Shakespeare had black neighbours as several indeed

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had settled down in England and Scotland—an obvious inspiration to write a story about racial relationships.

In the mid 16th c., England involved in profitable slave trade turned into the biggest slave trading nation and carried African slaves to the New World. In 1562 John Hawkins embarked on his first slaving voyage transporting 300 blacks from the Guinea Coast to Hispaniola where they were sold for 10,000 pounds. Elizabeth I called this 'detestable' but later invested in his subsequent trips and loaned him ships. A Privy Council Order of 1596 and later royal proclamation of 1601 expressed concern about the flooding of England with 'the great numbers of Negroes and Black moors' authorizing 'those kind of people' must be 'sent out of the land'.

Othello's past remains shadowy and unknown. Was he a redeemed" slave in the European world, his life modeled on the adventures of Leo Africanus a Moor sold into slavery, educated and converted to Christianity later? Othello's romantic and idealized descriptions of exotic Africa laced with dangers and life threatening encounters—of greedy lions, devouring crocodiles, cold mountains, hair breadth escape from violent Arabs, and wild Moors—address the European as an implied listener/reader similar to Africanus' narratives. His African past though never explicitly forms the context that defines his 'black skin, white mask' (Frantz Fanon) split personality and precarious identity in the white world.

Though honoured as a capable Military General, enjoying patronage of the powerful Senate as the saviour of Christendom, Othello remains a man constantly on "trial" in this society. From the beginning, he experiences his identity in contradictory terms set by the Venetians and by tracing his history for Desdemona's ears, he reveals how he can gain access to his own origins only through the 'ascriptions of European colonial discourses' (Bartels 2004). He recreating and memorializes his African past in through romanticized exotic narratives about the anthropophagi, men whose heads grown below their shoulders, vast deserts, and later his mother's "charmed" handkerchief. Even as knight-like protector of whites against the Turks/Muslims/Heathen, he continues to be insider/outsider, white/black, Christian/non-Christian. Having internalized white discourse about black's racial inferiority, his integration in his social milieu is fragile and fractured by his secret marriage to Desdemona. The inter-racial marriage makes him the butt of racial abuse, communal charivari both physical and verbalized violence: 'an old black ram is tupping your white ewe' (1.1.89-90), 'you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you, you'll have coursers for cousins, and jennets for germans' (1.1.111-114) and 'your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs' (1.1. 115-8). Being on trial, subject racist abuse, Othello by extension places his wife on trial, reconfiguring power relationships. Both a hero and demonic/monstrous 'Other' he remains a threat to the whites. Accused of being a 'foul thief', of practicing magic and witchcraft to bewitch an innocent white girl into his 'sooty bosom' Othello represents the figure of the oppressed of every culture.

Miscegenation is viewed as a curse based on "unnatural" lust rather than love. The "transgression" their marriage represents opens their private, domestic space to the voyeuristic gaze of 'Others' ending with the much awaited "peep" into the bedroom—a site or a grotesque theatrical setting that converges race, women, sexual violence and marriage. Jyotsna Singh (2004) resists bracketing 'gender' and 'race' as identical categories. According to her, while the play creates points of identification between black male sexuality and white femininity and female desire as an embodiment of the collective monstrous threat to the white male hegemony, the predicament of the white woman and the black man can not be seamlessly conflated. The black man is the greater victim, his suffering caused by the violation of the taboo: blacks must never marry whites. And finally, destructive internalization of Eurocentric discourse on demonic otherness of blacks, results in the collapse of selfhood: 'I am no Othello; Othello is a lie'.

However, gender and women constitute a significant part of racial conflicts. The killing of Desdemona is not simply wife murder in that sense. Othello acts the authoritarian patriarch in the racially polarized world, and notwithstanding his elopement and sexual passion for Desdemona, he wishes to tame, domesticate and control her to legitimize his white-Christian-European identity. Women in the play—Desdemona, her maid Emilia, a prostitute named Bianca are pitted against the racist power politics of men, triply marginalized due to their colour, class and gender. In fact, the woman's body eroticized and conflated with Africa, the Dark Continent as Patricia Parker suggests, must be discovered or viewed (c.f. 'the ocular proof'). 'The Willow Song Scene' enables

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the collective protest of women against patriarchy, silencing and racism, to be heard.

In the cinematic adaptations of *Othello*, race becomes a visible marker that separates the hero from the white world. As a "mimic man" (V.S Naipul) he imitates the whites, acting as the upper class Christian man, a believer in duty and respectability. However, he is also the anguished outsider who negotiates his identity and is at the mercy of his patrons—the Venetian Senate, the aldermen and the bishop who use his services but accept racial abuse without any sense of contradiction. From the very beginning of the play, Othello becomes the butt of racial abuse—as the 'Old black ram' tupping the 'white ewe', as a barbary horse, a pagan, practitioner of witchcraft accused of enchanting and seducing Desdemona by charms or spells. In Renaissance England, race as has been pointed out earlier, linked to moral or spiritual corruption suggestive of sin in the Christian paradigm.

Omkara*: Indianized Adaptation of *Othello

Omkara is located in a typically Indian milieu of political warfare in the interiors of Uttar Pradesh. The hero Omi or Omkara is a chieftain heading a gang of criminals including Langda Tyagi (or Iago) his lieutenant, and Kesu (Cassio) his trusted companion. The film follows the storyline and plot of the original substituting 'caste' as 'race'. Cultural anthropologists and historians in India resist the conflation of these ontological categories. Andre Beteille (2001) challenges the United Nations definition of race (and caste): Race includes, 'racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance'. According to him, 'interested parties' within and outside the U.N 'would like to bring caste discrimination in general and the practice of untouchability in particular within the purview of racial discrimination'.

'Caste' to both Beteille and Dipankar Gupta (2001) is mutable and heterogeneous. To Beteille scheduled castes of India are not a monolithic entity—a single race—as much as the Brahmins themselves. He says, 'Every social group cannot be regarded as a race simply because we want to protect it against prejudice and discrimination'. The 'metaphor' of race is a 'dangerous weapon whether it is used for asserting white supremacy or for making demands on behalf of disadvantaged groups'. Gupta's arguments underline the complexity of the debate going back to the Aryan-Dravidian issue--'black skinned' vs. white skinned people. 'Caste' again is not a stable category as in Vedas 'fair skin' may be suggestive of knowledge than merely skin colour. Kalpana Kannabiran uses the arguments of Dalit human rights groups in India and ideologues like, Jotiba Phule, Pandita Ramabai and Ambedkar to critique Beteille's position. To her, caste discrimination that includes, 'exclusion, untouchability, denial of constitutional rights and guarantees, violent subjugation and histories of slavery' is similar to internationally recognized forms of racism. Etymologically the word 'caste' originated from Portuguese "casta" 16th c. that meant 'purity of blood'. British Empire used 'race' conceptually to understand the social groupings in India.

The *Yagnavalkyasmriti and Manusmriti* disapprove of marrying outside one's caste. Miscegenation, they argue, create new, despicable and monstrous castes—like the Chandals born from union between a Brahmin woman and Shudra man. Othello (play) expresses this paranoia about inter-racial mixing from the very beginning: 'the old black ram is tupping your white ewe' (1.1.85-86). By locating racial tensions into a casteist world, *Omkara* explores race and caste along with ideas of marriage, domesticity and sexuality.

In the **'Making of *Omkara*'** actors in the movie express differing views on adaptation of *Othello* as *Omkara*: 'The plot is same, setting is different' and dark humour with realism. Vishal Bhardwaj insists on the universality of the theme: ''situations are human not bound by any society or culture". Located in a town in U.P, the film dramatizes inner conflicts of the half-caste Omkara in a Brahminical society. Like the chivalrous warrior-hero Othello, he becomes in this version a folk hero, as the song 'dham dham dharriya' underlines. Unlike, the 'Othello Music' (G. Wilson Knight) romanticized, idealized language of his European counterpart, Omkara speaks in a folksy dialect spiced with abuses, with the word 'kathore' as repetitive refrain reiterating his blood chilling capacity to murder. As an insider/outsider, he is patronized and exploited by the local leaders for political gains like Othello supported by Venetian senate.

'Caste' doesn't emerge as a fixed and immutable category as 'Race' in the film while race politics accepts that 'blacks' and 'whites' are fixed categories. Dolly as an Indianized Desdemona simpers in an affected and artificial manner, lacking the defiant spirit of her British counterpart, a symbol of patriarchal authority's stronghold on U.P. This upper caste girl has hands smeared with cow dung, cooks on a *chulha* and becomes part of the lower class-caste household. That caste divides could be surmounted becomes evident in the 'temple scene'

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wherein Omkara along with his patron, a local leader cum politician, Bhaisahib, anoints Kesu Firangi as the new youth leader. His half-caste status legitimizes his access to the temple. In one of scenes, Langada Tyagi's sacred thread or janeu is especially focused upon in a close shot, symbolizing his caste trappings, providing him a reason to hate Omi.

There is an erasure of female space in the gender politics in *Omkara*. The erasure might not be an oversight but rather a naturalistic depiction of women in contemporary, semi-urban U.P, as objects or commodities denied a subjectivity. The film uses the figure of the prostitute in a dramatically different manner than in the text, turning Bianca into the sexy siren Bipasha Basu dancing as country lass to the erotic number 'Beedi'.

In Parker's version, the 'willow song scene' is sensitively filmed depicting Desdemona being bathed by her maid, Emilia. As she splashes water around her, singing the 'willow' song gently as a lullaby, even as Othello's shadowy profile captured near the willow trees silhouetted against the night sky provides a visual continuity. The willow scene has been dropped from various adaptations, dismissed according to Edward Pechter as 'domestic female babble' despite its feminist overtones that allows women to protest against patriarchy, domestic violence and misogyny. In the enclosed private/separate space, both women oblivious of class hierarchies speak of men, marriage, chastity, fallen women and adultery, encouraging a dialogue on gender relationships and the victimization of women crossing thresholds of racial markings. In *Omkara* this scene gets omitted perhaps due to cultural differences.

Desdemona's murder is visually represented in varied cultural contexts in the different adaptations. In Laurence Olivier (1965) version the emphasis is on the stark contrast between the hero's artificially blackened skin and red mouth and exaggerated 'blackness' in contrast to the 'alabaster skin' of his sleeping wife. His melodramatic emotions—rage, self-pity, romantic posturing are different from the subtle underpinnings of Fishbourne (1995) version. In *Omkara* the scene takes on a different signification by using the symbolism of the wedding night, flower decorations on the bed, red sari and the swing, encoding cultural differences and finally, eroticizing the actual killing by turning it literally into a "union". Unlike the spirited protest or physical struggle of Desdemona in English adaptations, Dolly is stupefied, paralyzed and silenced before her death. The romantic imagery of the swing, broken bangles, and poignant lullaby, evoke a different mood than the tragic lamentation of Othello in the Fishbourne version.

Again in place of the final speech of Othello, there is a silencing of Omkara. However, Bhardwaj lends a new dramatic and ideological intensity to the film by introducing a new motif of the woman's vengeance. In the last scene in Omkara, it is Indu Tyagi (Emilia) who finally aware of her husband's evil machinations, takes a sickle in Goodess Kali-like manner and stabs him committing suicide thereafter. Was Bhardwaj positing an altered female space or merely using a stereotyped formula that conflates woman and goddess, mythologizing a woman's potential to settle scores if need be. Is Indu Tyagi the New Woman? Or does her suicide provide a kind of jarring, discontinuous effect?

The Final Speech of Othello in the Fishburne version becomes the final moment of greatest tragic intensity. He repeats the words from the text in verbatim:

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me, as I am. Nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice.
Then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe… (5.2.346-53)

The frontal view of his face in highlighted in the scene, capturing his remorse, anguish and tearful eyes. His last words heighten the sense of tragic pathos underlining his rage and sense of isolation—visually represented through the dagger—'I have a weapon' he holds. His alienation becomes complete even as he betrays absolute internalization of Eurocentric discourse on racial otherness as he refers to himself as the 'base Indian'.

In contrast, the last scene in *Omkara* silences the hero who gets transformed into the romantic-remorseful lover singing in isolated splendour, as he rocks his dead wife on the swing. The final scenes in Parker and Bhardwaj capture the issue of 'race' and 'caste' with dramatic intensity. The scenes reiterate what Dipankar Gupta refers to as: 'Once a black, always a black' phenomenon and how 'caste' can not substitute 'race' as by using the language of 'race to encode caste situation, the emphasis shifts from removing the scourge of caste from Indian society to making caste identity a fixed political resource'. *Omkara* stops short, therefore,

at a point when *Othello* reaches its highest tragic intensity.

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