

**KALKI**

**KOECHLIN**

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**A**

**DOCUMENT**

**IN**

**MADNESS**

**7**

**DO INDIAN WOMEN  
MIRROR OPHELIA?**

**LIVING  
SHAKESPEARE**

A collection of essays.

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# FOREWORD

CIARÁN

DEVANE

Does Shakespeare remain relevant four centuries after his death? Of course he does, because the abiding facts of human life, and the core themes of his plays – identity, power, faith, meaning, humanity itself – are central to every age.

Kalki Koechlin is one of Bollywood's rising stars, recognised as a challenging and exciting talent. In *'A Document in Madness'*, she scrutinises the place of women in India today, and finds a new perspective on gender imbalance through the character of Ophelia.

This essay is part of a collection, for which we asked some exceptional public figures – Nobel Laureates and best-selling authors, musicians and politicians, actors and activists – to reflect on Shakespeare's continuing relevance to today's burning issues. The collection is part of *Shakespeare Lives*, our extensive, year-long programme marking the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death.

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**WHAT**

**IS**

**MADNESS?**

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# INTRODUCTION

## SHAKESPEARE

### IN INDIA

Actress and activist Kalki Koechlin has chosen the tragic character of Ophelia from *Hamlet* as the focus of her essay. The history of *Hamlet* in India stretches back to the 1770s when, along with *Richard III*, it is thought to be the earliest of Shakespeare's plays to be performed in the subcontinent, albeit by English actors for English audiences.

In 1838, the first Bengali playhouse, the Hindu Theatre, opened its doors with a production of scenes from *Julius Caesar* and in the succeeding decades, Shakespeare's works were translated into Indian languages and adapted for local audiences. Bengali translations of Shakespeare appeared annually in Calcutta, and Marathi and Urdu translations were performed in Bombay theatres. Indian Shakespeare productions waned during India's anti-colonial struggle, but after independence, interest in Shakespeare, led by Utpal Dutt, saw translations of his plays adapted afresh for the new nation.

In addition to the theatre, Shakespeare was brought to the people of India in the classroom. The Indian Educational Act of 1835 required the teaching of the English language and Shakespeare for Indians being trained for service in the British Empire's colonial administration.

Millions of Indians continue to encounter Shakespeare in classrooms and theatres, but cinema increasingly provides the readiest access to his works. An Urdu translation of *Hamlet* – *Khoon ka Khoon* – appeared on screen in 1935, and many adaptations have since followed, including a Bollywood spectacle, *Hum Paanch* (1980). Films relocating Shakespeare's plays in Indian settings have been successful at the box office, most notably Vishal Bhardwaj's tragic trilogy of *Macbeth* set in the Mumbai underworld in *Maqbool* (2003), *Othello* set in semi-feudal Uttar Pradesh in *Omkaara* (2006), and his adaptation of *Hamlet* as *Haider* (2014) set in militarised and tense Kashmir.

## **'A DOCUMENT IN MADNESS': DO INDIAN WOMEN MIRROR OPHELIA?**

by *Kalki Koechlin*

When I decided to leave my husband three years ago, the biggest question was not whether I was doing the right thing or how I would cope emotionally, but where was I going to live? For a divorced, single, female actor, finding a place to rent in Mumbai is not easy. Chatura Rao summed it up when she wrote in her blog *The Ladies Finger*:

'In Mumbai, your religion and marital status are scrutinised by the pillars of authority in housing society committees, and it's a test that takes sweet talk, begging and sometimes a white lie or two, to pass.'<sup>1</sup>

And so I quickly learnt how to expertly answer, with my head turned down, and my eyes to the ground. Who is the head of the family? My father, but he's busy on business. Who was I going to live with? My mother, but my brother would visit regularly. You will not have boys over, or parties. No sir.

My story is a small example of the confusing pressure Indian women face in today's patriarchal surroundings. On the one hand she must appear pure and pious, while on the other she finds ways to be independent and liberate herself from her patriarchal cage. At the beginning of *Hamlet*, Ophelia also appears to be an innocent, chaste girl who listens to the patriarchal figures of her life, her father and brother. She quietly heeds their advice against giving in to Hamlet's love, by saying to Polonius, 'I shall obey.'<sup>2</sup> On the other, when she is confronted by Hamlet, who at first claims to love her and then accuses her of having seduced him into it, Ophelia blames herself, exclaiming, 'Oh, woe is me'<sup>3</sup> and eventually goes mad. Ophelia struggles with the duality of being Laertes' 'kind sister'<sup>4</sup> and Hamlet's 'breeder of sinners'<sup>5</sup> and when she goes mad she even refers to this struggle when she says 'we know what we are, but know not what we may be.'<sup>6</sup> and this is true for most women in Indian society, who are punished, or punish themselves, for expressing their revolt against the patriarchy. Are we all Ophelias?

I play Ophelia in a unique rendition of *Hamlet* (2012), directed by Rajat Kapoor, where each actor plays a clown, and the clown in turn performs one of the characters in the play. My clown's name is 'Fifi', and Fifi becomes Ophelia. The politics of each of the clowns in their modern lives reflects the politics of the characters in Shakespeare's play. Soso, the clown playing Hamlet, along with

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Title 'A Document in Madness' from *Hamlet* Act 4, Scene 5

<sup>1</sup> Chatura Rao, *The Ladies Finger*, 9 December 2015

<sup>2</sup> *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 3

<sup>3,5</sup> *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1

<sup>4,6</sup> *Hamlet*, Act 4, Scene 2

the other clowns, treats Fifi as the baby clown of the troupe. She is sidelined until she gets everyone's attention by performing Ophelia's madness. Performing this madness is, for me, a liberating experience as an actor. Where most of the play I am being quiet, shy and embarrassed, suddenly I can be loud, unpredictable, laugh and cry, thus letting out all the emotions, which I have had to keep under wraps for the rest of the play (and throughout my life!)

I draw from the frustration of wanting to be accepted as pretty, sweet and popular, just like Fifi, and being simultaneously judged for being so. In my own life, living with this contradiction is part of my daily routine. As an actor in Bollywood, I am constantly in the limelight, for the way I dress or the roles I play, and yet many times, the audience mixes me up with the 'bold' characters I play, so when I played a prostitute in my first film, *Dev.D* (2009), I was offered a series of prostitute roles (which I turned down), because I was a girl willing to show myself 'in that light'. Although I have been acting in the industry for six years, I still find myself in this dilemma. It is easy to see parallels with Ophelia's world. The lover, Hamlet, blames Ophelia for seducing him: 'you jig and amble and you lisp'.<sup>7</sup> I have heard that many times, from the media that accuse me of wanting publicity and flaunting my body. Then there is the King, who uses Ophelia's position, as a reliable girl who has Hamlet's attention, to get information about him. Not unlike those well-meaning NGOs, and the government at large, which represent me as the 'women's torch bearer', a role which comes with its own set of expectations – I am expected to act with strength on all issues representing women, and in a way, I am imprisoned by this expectation as well. The only way Ophelia can tell her own story is through her madness, and many times I feel that my spoken word, my sense of humour, and my 'quirkiness', are the armour I put on to fight these patriarchal constraints.

Sometimes it's all too much. The frustration does have to come out somehow, at times through emotional outbursts when I play Ophelia's nunnery scene and her madness at the end. This 'unwomanly' behaviour, which comes from dealing with so many contradictions, is often easy to categorise as madness, but I would argue that sometimes it is simply a way of obtaining the freedom to speak truthfully. Set in the early modern era, Ophelia would probably not have received a formal education, nor a place to work; she would not have had a medium through which to express her truth as I do now through my creative work.

In India today there are so many women who are not as lucky as me. Some have let loose their frustrations of fighting patriarchy, and then are punished severely for it. Journalist Smriti Kak Ramachandran drew attention to the case of Deepali in an article in *The Hindu*. Deepali had a fight with her husband and her eldest child, which landed her in a mental institution, where she was accused of being bipolar despite 'the psychiatrist's letter stating that she does not have bipolar disorder'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1

<sup>8</sup> Smriti Kak Ramachandran, *The Hindu*, 3 December 2014

This brings me to the question that Polonius asks: what is madness? How can we really prove someone's madness:

'... for to define true madness,

What is't but to be nothing else but mad?'<sup>9</sup>

The question still rings true today. Women are often accused of madness and even locked up if they try to defy the patriarchal structure of their society.

Another article, by journalist Shai Venkatraman, pointedly says:

"...some [women] had simply been put there [in mental institutions] because they were having affairs, or were embroiled in property disputes with their families."<sup>10</sup>

Archaic laws on property and marriage have not changed, leaving women too often at the mercy of men. Along with this is the issue of victim blaming: in Act 3, Scene 1, Hamlet accuses Ophelia of painting another face, of honesty being transformed by beauty rather than vice versa. The chilling case of Jyoti Singh is surely the lowest point for the treatment of women in India today. Ms Singh suffered a brutal gang rape on a Delhi bus in 2012, which resulted in her death from her injuries days later. Her tragic case shows us how a woman is judged, for the clothes she wears, the company she keeps and the choices she makes. Ms Singh went out at night to watch a Hollywood movie (*Life of Pi*, 2012) with a male friend. She was dressed in jeans and 'modern' attire, and that is looked upon as a girl being 'forward' and not 'traditional' in her values. Going out with a man in the evening for a film is also seen by parts of society as the behaviour of someone 'loose-moraled'. And so these labels are put on our women, and corner us when we stray from the expected societal norms. Ms Singh paid with her life.

This attitude is prevalent in Indian society: if a woman is raped, she is questioned for what she was wearing, if she was drinking, what company she was keeping, etc. An Indian stand-up comedy group called AIB explored this through sarcasm in the short video titled *It's your fault* (2013) that I took part in. There are several references in the video to things people in power said. One village panchayat blamed the rise in rape incidents to the consumption of chow mein, referring to the rise in fast foods and an opening market contributing to women becoming more free. Also, popular spiritual leader Asaram Babu said that Jyoti Singh should have treated the men with respect and called them 'bhैया' (brother) instead of spitting on them, so that they would have treated her more gently.

In a famous case in Muzaffarnagar reported by Sweta Dutta and Manish Sahu in 2016, a social worker whose name was not revealed, killed herself after her rape video went viral. As one person recounts:

'A couple of days ago, when the 30-second video was circulated in the village, her children and husband got to know about the incident. But when her husband asked her about it, she refused to speak. She told me that everyone would blame her.'<sup>11</sup>

This fear of blame has led to many such cases where women feel the need to end their lives rather than face the scrutiny of their society.

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<sup>9</sup> *Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2

<sup>10</sup> Shai Venkatraman, *Inter Press Service News Agency*, 30 January 2015

<sup>11</sup> Sweta Dutta and Manish Sahu, *The Indian Express*, 14 January 2016

Patriarchy blames women. It is present in *Hamlet* when Ophelia's brother Laertes says:

'The chariest maid is prodigal enough  
If she unmask her beauty to the moon.'<sup>12</sup>

Effectively he is saying her beauty could lead Hamlet on. Eventually Hamlet himself questions her with 'Are you honest?'<sup>13</sup> and 'Are you fair?'<sup>14</sup> as though she must choose one or the other, when he continues with:

'... the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness.'<sup>15</sup>

Ophelia is cornered by contradictions, unable to change the fact that she is beautiful and attractive, and unable to maintain dignity in her honesty, as she loses Hamlet to her madness, and loses her father to Hamlet.

Duality for Ophelia is having to please both her conservative society and her demanding lover. The contradiction comes from a pressure in a patriarchal society where a woman's value is measured by her purity, particularly with regards to her sexuality. In Bollywood this depiction of the commercial heroine as a pious, virginal beauty is very common. One Bollywood example among many: in *Cocktail* (2012), the hero finds himself torn between the crazy, liberated, sexy girl and the pious, simple girl and chooses the latter. In a way Ophelia encapsulates both women. She starts out pious, obedient and rational and becomes bawdy and irrational – yet, for her brother Laertes, she seems capable of more truth. When he says:

'Hadst thou thy wits...  
It could not move [me] thus.'<sup>16</sup>

Laertes recognises her empowered state when she is mad.

Indian women are facing more and more contradictions today. We have access to western ideas of fashion and education which allows us to earn money and become independent, yet we are held back by patriarchal society. I continue to perform a balancing act, between being famous and wanting to retain a personal life, or being seen as sexy and wanting to retain my dignity, but many times I feel cornered into silence, or that I must escape it through my performances and writings.

Other stories from today are far darker: that of Jyoti Singh; or Deepali; or the woman from Muzaffarnagar; these present-day Ophelias continue to haunt us, to remind us of the underlying fear of men lashing out against women who defy the patriarchal norms of society. For some, the path they tread – whether from choice or through chance – drives them, like Ophelia, to madness and suicide. But while the limits of patriarchy are clear, Indian women are also experiencing liberation within it. The journalists' work I have quoted, and the protests of outrage taken up by tens of thousands of Indians following the death of Jyoti Singh, show us that our society is changing. Is it time to say goodbye to Ophelia? Perhaps, instead, we should be dreaming of an Ophelia who doesn't drown in the river, but swims strongly to the other side.

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<sup>12</sup> *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 3

<sup>13-15</sup> *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1

<sup>16</sup> *Hamlet*, Act 4, Scene 2

# ABOUT THE WRITER KALKI KOECHLIN



Kalki Koechlin is an Indian actress and screenwriter of French ethnicity, who predominantly works in Bollywood. Alongside her film career, she has written, produced and acted in several stage plays in India.

She is the recipient of a National Film Award, a Filmfare Award and two Screen Awards. She garnered critical acclaim for her performances in the crime thriller *Shaitan* (2011), the political drama *Shanghai* (2012), and the comedy-drama *Waiting* (2015). She appeared in *Freedom Matters* (2016), a documentary aimed at spreading awareness on human trafficking, alongside Kailash Satyarthi.

As well as her work on stage and in film, Kalki Koechlin is an activist. She promotes various causes ranging from health and education to women's empowerment and gender equality, and regularly uses YouTube as a platform to discuss these issues.

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The British Council has commissioned a collection of essays by eminent thinkers around the world, from politicians to Nobel Prize-winning writers, interpreting themes in Shakespeare's work for today.

*Living Shakespeare* is a dialogue between exceptional public figures and Shakespeare's works in relation to the burning questions which each writer faces. The collection demonstrates Shakespeare's relevance, from the stage, to our homes, to the staterooms of power.

The issues raised include optimism in diplomacy, female empowerment, listening, racial integration, and a response to extremism.

The essays are part of *Shakespeare Lives*, a global celebration of the influence of William Shakespeare on culture, language, education and society.

The British Council, the GREAT Britain campaign and an unprecedented number of partners are commemorating the 400th anniversary of his death with a series of initiatives including a unique online collaboration, performances on stage and film, exhibitions, public readings, conversations, debates and educational resources for people all around the world in 2016.



With thanks to our partners The Open University and BBC World Service.