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Research Article



William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in Adaptation: A Cultural Materialist Reading of Bollywood Movie *Maqbool*

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Abstract

The present research article focuses on Bollywood movie *Maqbool* (2004), the Hindi language movie adaptation of Shakespeare's famous play *Macbeth* (1606). Shakespeare's plays have become available in the cinematic adaptations in many different languages across the globe. All these adaptations focus on different aspects of the original texts, and come up with some entirely new movies which at times have the Shakespearean elements in them. The plots, settings and the timelines are of course different, but they make Shakespeare's dramas available to a wider audience across different cultures. *Maqbool* is such a movie adaptation in Hindi, directed by Indian film-director, Vishal Bhardwaj. The movie relates to the incidents and events from Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, though it has entirely new flavours of its own as a typical Bollywood movie. Like Shakespeare's plays, these movies also have something to offer to the

critics. A close analysis of such adaptations, in relation to the original textual creations, can bring forth many new critical perspectives. This article aims at analysing the movie, *Maqbool* from the perspective of cultural materialism where it tries to bring out that how the movie interrelates with the contemporary social and political situations of the time which it depicts. There are certain hidden structures in the movie which remain unearthed when watched without critical eyes. The paper attempts a cultural materialist reading of *Maqbool* to bring out such hidden aspects of the movie.

Keywords: Macbeth, Maqbool, Cultural Materialism, Movie, Adaptation, Popular Culture, Media Studies

William Shakespeare's popularity in the present times has considerably been seen in the movie adaptations of most of his plays. There is hardly any language and any country with a film-industry which have not adapted the famous plays of the great playwright on the popular screen. "Since the very earliest years in the development of the motion picture film-makers have found the plays of William Shakespeare to be continually tempting as subject matter for films" (Camp 107). As Marvin Felheim writes in his essay, *Criticism and the Films of Shakespeare's Plays*, "Among the other technical and artistic developments of the twentieth century, the motion picture camera, with its inherent capabilities for sound and color, was an inevitable step; equally unavoidable was the filming of the plays of Shakespeare. The union of film and Shakespeare was as natural and ordained a combination as bread and butter or life and breath" (Felheim 147).

Many of Shakespeare's plays have already been adapted into various languages of the world. They are now seen in new lights, with different kinds of regional variations. It is quite obvious that "When a film is generated from a play, a new text is fashioned out of an old one, and we are sensitized to how both interrelate" (Burnett). As a result of the recent cinematic developments, the movie adaptations have opened new thresholds for a wider range of the audiences, coming from various cultures and following different traditions. As most of the adaptations of the plays have some regional elements to offer to the particular kind of audiences, apart from the Shakespearean features, the spectators find them appealing, as for most of them it becomes quite a fascinating experience to watch Shakespeare's creations with local variations in their familiar settings.

Directed by Indian movie-director, Vishal Bhardwaj, *Maqbool* (2004) is one such Hindi language movie adaption of Shakespeare's one of the most famous plays, *Macbeth* (1606). Though "Unlike Western directors who labor under the Author's weighty sign (and the subset of those who exist in an Oedipal or Henrician anxiety of influence), ... Bhardwaj seems unburdened by the Shakespearean texts and theatrical tradition" (Rodgers 500), there are incidents and events depicted in the movie which directly correlate to the situations described in the original play. The characters are drawn on the basis of the original characters, and the plot of the movie follows the plot of the play closely, though in a different context. Apart from the similar elements, the movie also retains its originality in the depiction of the cultural

variations, and in the creation of a contemporary context based on the available model. As a movie “*Maqbool* has much to offer to those who are interested in transculturated Shakespeare” (Sen 5).

The present article attempts a cultural materialist analysis of *Maqbool* to bring out certain elements of social significance. The movie has deep layers of social and political upheavals having their roots in politics and crimes. A cultural materialist analysis of the movie will help in understanding the situations which led to a particular kind of depictions of certain incidents and events. At the same time, it will try to unearth the ongoing power struggle within the storyline of the movie. The term Cultural Materialism comes from the writings of the famous Marxist critic, Raymond Williams. In his opinion, it is “a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism” (Williams 5). “It affirms, against literary 'tradition', the materiality and con-structedness of cultural practice, including 'literature', but devalues (denies) the determination of the economic in general” (Neale 199). During the 1980’s, cultural materialism emerged as a tool for studying Shakespeare’s plays. With the publication of the influential book, *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* by Jonathan Dollimore and Allen Sinfield, in 1985, its relevance became more known than before. It analyses the existence of the dominant, residual, and emergent elements in a culture. The dominant ideology signifies the most powerful elements in a culture. The residual elements signify the power that is past, but its shadow is somewhere present in the culture. The emergent elements are always in seek of power and try to support their voices. They are, in this way, the new emerging elements of a culture.

Culture, according to Raymond Williams, is not a static phenomenon, rather it is always evolving and developing. In this process of the evolution and development of culture, there is always a kind of power struggle to be found among the different social groups from the different classes of a particular culture. This ongoing struggle is for power and importance within the culture. Each group in a culture tries to be dominant. Similarly, the present dominant group tries to maintain its gained power, and takes certain measures for doing that. In this way, the struggle for absolute power goes on, and the current power structure in the culture changes from time-to-time. Cultural materialism studies this struggle for power in relation to the relevant historical and political events in a particular text. This kind of reading of the literary texts, especially, Shakespeare’s plays, is, in many ways, similar to American New Historicism. According to some critics, cultural materialism is often described as a politicised form of historiography. A text is always very closely related to its context, and a close cultural materialist analysis of any text can be helpful in giving the detailed contextual – cultural, historical, and political - information about that particular text. In this way, the cultural materialist reading of a literary text mostly focuses on the cultural practices and other social elements in that particular text, and studies them in relation to the political situation and historical events of the time in which the action takes place. The main focus of the study remains to point out the existence of the different social groups and their mutual relationships in a culture. It tries to find out how a society operates with its different social and cultural groups in the political as well as historical context. Such an analysis of the texts aims to find out the dominant, residual, and emergent elements in a society at any particular time and

political situation as described in those particular texts. It also takes into consideration the dissidents or rebellious voices which, though not strong always, emerge from the oppressed, ruled, or the marginalized sections of the social structure from time-to-time. So, in a way, the cultural materialist reading is the study of a text, or a text in adaptation, in its true political and historical contexts. In this kind of reading, a particular text, or the text in adaptation, can be studied and analysed based on the time and the cultural background when it has been produced. Similarly, one can know something more about the historical and political events of that time from the analysis of the text.

Like Shakespeare's original plays, the theory of cultural materialism can also be applied to the various movie adaptations of his texts. The only difference is, whereas the original Shakespearean dramas will say more about the contemporary politics and the Elizabethan society of that time, the more recent movie adaptations will give some more important information regarding the timelines and the different social and cultural backgrounds they are placed in. Thus, when analysed critically from the perspective of the cultural materialism, Vishal Bhardwaj's attempt to adapt Shakespeare's *Macbeth* into the movie, *Maqbool*, equally has the potential to say something more about the different social and political events, prevalent during that time, which have been hitherto mostly hidden from the consciousness of the common audience. As a movie, *Maqbool* has various hidden layers of meanings which are closely connected to different social and political structures prevalent during the contemporary times, or rather, the times around which the movie has been created. A cultural materialist analysis of the movie will help considerably in unfolding these hidden layers of meanings and bringing out some untold truths about the depicted society and culture.

In Bhardwaj's movie, *Maqbool*, Jahangir Khan signifies the dominant ideology. He, with his powerful criminal as well as political networks, is in absolute dominance when the movie begins. At this point of time, he is like the King Duncan of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Miyan Maqbool can be categorized as emergent element in the beginning. He is the person who is, most likely, going to be the head of the gang after Jahangir Khan, thus, works as the Macbeth of Shakespeare's original play. His ambition is more encouraged by the prophecy of Pandit, who is the direct translation of Shakespeare's Witches. Nimmi's words further put coals in the fire of Maqbool's ambitious imagination. There are other emergent elements too which can be traced in Maqbool's companions. Everyone is trying to outsmart the other. DCP Devsare symbolises the past residual element, and at present, works as a voice of the dissident in the movie. He is an honest police officer who represents the residual part of the likes of commissioner Deshpande who has earlier seized the house of Jahangir Khan, at the time of his own marriage. He is symbolic of the past settled and maintained of law and order, and also represents a voice of dissident in this degenerated society. His character is absolutely contrary to those of Pandit and Purohit. At the end of the movie, DCP Devsare's maintaining of the law and order can be related to Malcolm's coronation, and in contemporary terms the victory of the law and order over the evil criminals and corruption.

Guddu and Sameera are portrayed as the dissident elements. They break the normal law of love and marriage. Despite the fact that they are from the different religion, and Sameera's father, Jahangir Khan's dominance in the culture, they love. Nimmi has also an important

dissident voice in the movie. Although she is the mistress of Jahangir Khan, and she has to do things according to his wishes, she is always aware that she is being exploited. She knows and regrets that a person of his father's age is exploiting her physically. She is aware of her misfortune, but at the same time, she has courage to love secretly. And to find that love she has her further plans which she imposes on Maqbool, her lover. She is well aware of the fact that Guddu and Sameera love, and Guddu can replace Jahangir Khan in the future, so she makes Maqbool aware of the situation, and gradually also makes plans for his success and gaining her own love and freedom. She is, in this way, a dissident voice in the movie who becomes successful with the help and companionship of an emergent voice that is seen in the character of Miyan Maqbool. Maqbool, too, who loves secretly to the mistress of his boss, although that love is mutual and from both sides, here works as a dissident element. He is represented as the emergent dissident voice who, with his acts and plans of dethroning the dominant, consequently becomes dominant in the future. Pandit and Purohit, who are portrayed as a substitute to the three Witches, work more actively in the movie than the Witches do in Shakespeare's play. They set the plot for the forthcoming events. They encourage Maqbool by announcing the upcoming future, as well as, in a way, warn him against Kake's son. Moreover, Purohit emphasises on the point that Pandit's prophecy is always right, and in the same way, Pandit surprisingly, though comically, exclaims to Kaka that how he is alive up to that time, indicating towards his son's future and his own insecurity as a consequence. At the same time, he also implicates to Maqbool that for him the danger lies in Kaka and his son. Purohit declares that Kaka's son may be an answer to Maqbool. This, in a way, also warns Maqbool about his own safety, and subsequently paves way for the upcoming violence and bloodshed.

As the events of the movie suggest, it seems that there is a hierarchy of dethroning the supreme leader of the gang by deceiving others. As the comments of Pandit suggest, Jahangir Khan had earlier done the same to his supreme commander Lalji Bhai to dethrone him, and take his post as Miyan Maqbool does to Jahangir himself. This kind of criminal practices seem to be normal in the realm of crimes. Everyone seeks his or her own benefits. In the past, Jahangir Khan was emergent element in the criminal culture who dethroned Lalji Bhai, the dominant voice of his time, and himself became dominant. This cyclic process is seen again when Miyan Maqbool, the emergent voice of Jahangir's time, dethrones and replaces him by becoming dominant. The same thing is again repeated when Guddu and Riyaz Boti are represented as the emergent dissident voices against Maqbool. Towards the end of the movie, Boti is shown shooting Miyan Maqbool which signifies that he replaces the dominant voice of Maqbool with the help of Guddu. And moreover, ironically, this is the same Guddu who was previously employed to kill Boti. And who knows what would happen if the story is to move further. Guddu, as an emergent dissident voice, might replace the dominant Riyaz Boti. So, it is evident, as Raymond Williams has very aptly stated, that in a culture this process of struggle among different powerful elements always continues. This is an endless conflict which has no limit. Once one is the victor, then someone else.

Although Jahangir Khan is a criminal, he trusts, or at least shows that he trusts, his people. When Riyaz Boti comes under his protection, Maqbool warns Jahangir Khan against him, but he shows confidence over Boti and allows him to work for the gang. Nimmi is in an

illicit or illegal relationship with Jahangir Khan. Although she is just his mistress and nothing else, he always gives her respect in public and talks to her politely. He approves the marriage of his daughter Sameera with Kaka's son, Guddu, to make his daughter happy, ignoring their secret love-affair and different religious backgrounds. These are some of the positive qualities, but on the whole the fact is, he is a criminal-leader, and when a person is not important and beneficial to him, he finishes him or her. As it is seen in the movie, he kills his own brother-in-law. Even Lalji Bhai, his boss was perhaps also killed by him, as Pandit implicates. When he is satisfied with Nimmi, he sends for another mistress. Many other such cruel instances are there in the movie. Here, Bhardwaj's movie, *Maqbool*, stands visibly apart from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, as what the movie depicts in these incidents are not at all the parts of the original play. As the adapted portrayal of King Duncan, Jahangir Khan seems to be more negative in the movie. He has nothing of the sort which Shakespeare had put in the character of King Duncan. Duncan was a just king, according to the Shakespeare's play, whereas Jahangir Khan is a criminal-leader, a kind of don of the corrupt criminal gang who has both power and support from the politics. It is ironical, and in some ways seems real, when things are compared to the contemporary politics, that Jahangir Khan rather also helps people in politics. As Pandit and Purohit inform DCP Devsare, Jahangir Khan has an important role in the political elections. He is also a symbolical leader of his community, and so his people support the candidates he supports. While engaging in the cultural materialist analysis of the movie, this phenomenon of cultural representation can be better understood in relation to the role of caste, community, religion, and power in the contemporary Indian politics.

Miyan Maqbool, as the adaptation of the character of Macbeth, is depicted in a new light in the movie. Unlike Macbeth, who does not have any personal cause to kill King Duncan, Maqbool has sufficient reasons to kill Jahangir Khan. He loves Jahangir's mistress, Nimmi, and here is a personal cause involved. By killing him, he acquires both love and power. Moreover, Jahangir Khan's negative character and criminal background also contributes in the murder. His murder cannot be said as tragic as that of King Duncan. Basically, in the movie everything is depicted in a different social and cultural setting, so it tries to capture its own relevant areas for discussion. The story is romanticised in the contemporary corrupt social and cultural milieu. Maqbool signifies the emergent element in a culture which subverts the present dominant ideology and replaces it. By dethroning Jahangir Khan and becoming dominant himself, Maqbool proves it.

Nimmi, too, has sufficient reasons behind what she does in the movie. Unlike Lady Macbeth, she is exploited badly in this corrupt society of criminals. And to get her love and freedom, she chooses to help Maqbool in killing Jahangir Khan. Rather, it is she who motivates Maqbool for the murder. But, unlike Lady Macbeth, her motivation and encouragement to Maqbool for Jahangir's murder can be justified when it is considered that how badly she is being exploited by him. Being a poor among the criminals, she is a victim of power. And to come out of this prison of power, she chooses Maqbool as her redeemer. As a lover, he seems to be a ladder for her which helps her in coming out of the dark abyss of sexual exploitation. Nimmi has a strong dissident motif in the movie. She knows everything well, and tries hard to

come out of all the difficulties. As all are involved in selfishness, she also does not remain a backward, and tries to fulfil her own goals and wishes.

In *Maqbool*, Bhardwaj has replaced three Witches of the original play with the characters of two corrupt policemen, namely, Pandit and Purohit. Unlike the Witches, these policemen directly and very actively take part in action. They are involved in all major affairs of the movie. Basically, the upcoming events in the movie are being set by them. In fact, it is Pandit's prophecy which works as a toxic element for Maqbool, apart from Nimmi's persuasion to kill Jahangir Khan. They also represent how the police, power and politics are equally involved in crime and corruption in the contemporary culture. Although they are not directly involved in crime, they are certainly corrupt, and do not perform their assigned duties with dedication. Rather, they are seen eating and drinking with criminals which is symbolic of internal companionship among them. For instance, they let Riyaz Boti go when they have a chance to shoot him. It is the same Boti who, at the end, shoots Maqbool in the movie. At the same time, they also try to rescue Maqbool from the custom officials at the last moments. In short, they are corrupt, heedless, and comical in their own ways.

Everywhere in the movie, just like in a materialistic society and culture, there is to be found the dominance of power. Kaka is a Hindu, but he gratefully takes Jahangir's decision of marrying his own daughter to his son, Babu. He is rather happy that his son's life is spared from the anger of Jahangir Khan. He has perhaps some hope also, that his son may become the heir to Jahangir Khan, and will become dominant and most powerful person during the upcoming days. It makes him happy for his son, rather than worry for his religious belief and caste. The power dominates over everything. The same is seen in the societal response as well, otherwise, in general, such a marriage between the girl and the boy of two different religious communities can always be much more troublesome and unwelcome to most of the people of the society. But in the society which the movie represents, the political power and materialistic wealth are given more value and priority over the traditional cultural beliefs and practices, and set social systems of the ways of living.

To conclude, it can be noted that "the narrative of *Maqbool* engages with the popular film genre of the twenty first century as it presents the contemporary world of ambition and power play clothed in the domain of Mumbai underworld" (Rai and Tripathi 390). As the movie shows, there is deep secret-relationship between the politics and the underworld. In many cases, they are interdependent upon each-other for mutual benefits. This may be related, to some extent, to the role of people from criminal backgrounds in the contemporary politics as well as the political events around the time when the movie was made. There is complete collapse of the law and order. As it is depicted in the movie, the society is full of corruption and crime. It is tough for police to arrest or punish these politically backed criminals, and maintain law and order in the society. Persons like Pandit and Purohit from the police are also involved in the corruption. Honest officers face difficulty and they have to work under extreme political pressure. The movie, with some fictional accounts, very vividly presents the dark side of the power politics in a culture.

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