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Macbeth becomes Maqbool; Difficulties of Adaption

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Abstract

One of the most common opening lines on Shakespeare is “Shakespeare’s genius needs no introduction” which is true indeed. We are not only aware of his genius already but have our own ideas and arguments regarding his greatness, glory and genius! One of the chief characteristic of his writings is its durability and universality. Shakespeare remains the most adapted of writers in the 20th century with his works translated in many languages and transformed into movies and other kinds of screen adaptations. The present paper tries to explore the difficulties of contextualizing a Shakespearean play into an Indian movie and the process of appropriation that the director Vishal Bharadwaj undertakes.

Keywords- *Adaptation, Maqbool, Appropriation, Representation, Authenticity*

The English Bard, William Shakespeare known for his genius in depicting the human emotions in its variety hardly had any original plots. He borrowed heavily from history and often reworked the plays of his predecessors. The most famous examples are Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* into *Hamlet* and Lodge’s *Rosalind* into *As You Like It*. It is thus, only natural that he is himself adapted— on stage and in cinema, in novels and in poetry. The characters, the plots, and references to the exceptional poetry of Shakespeare are frequently found in both popular culture and in works of artistic nature.

The story of *Macbeth* (1606) taken from Holinshed’s *Chronicles of Scotland*, is a reworking of two stories— Donwald’s murder of King Duff and the career of Macbeth. The play has been variously adapted and appropriated on the silver screen and on television series. The most popular ones are *Joe MacBeth* (UK, 1955) directed by Ken Hughes and better still the Japanese 1957 flick *Throne of Blood* directed by Akira Kurosawa. The 2004 Indian adaptation of the play, *Maqbool* directed by Vishal Bharadwaj is taken up for the present discussion. The movie is a liberal reworking of the Shakespearean play into a new customised setting— that of Mumbai underworld. The adaptation on screen was atechanical

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and popular success earning a rating of 8.2/10 from more than six thousand viewers. (imdb, 2017) The movie also garnered major awards for its screenplay, and won the actor Pankaj Kapur, a National award for his role as the best supporting actor. Although much appreciated by critics and viewers alike, the movie had a major structural flaw which seems to have escape the notice of most critics.

In his paper, *From Ethnographic Impulses to Apocalyptic Endings: Bharadwaj's Maqbool and Kurosawa's Throne of Blood in Comparative Context*, talking about the appropriation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* into movie adaptations, Blair Orfall raises a pertinent question: "What does a Shakespearean tragedy offer to the director and audiences in the (post) post-colonial environment of contemporary India? (2005) The answer Orfall offers in the paper is the extremely complicated process of west-to-east-to east transmission of the story as Bharadwaj learns of the plot through the Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* though it is seemingly a process of "writing back" and "as a response to a legacy of colonization and enforced bardolatry". Blair also quotes Poonam Trivedi where she applauds Indian cinema to have "appropriated another imperial icon" apart from cricket. Maqbool does contextualise Shakespeare into the Indian setting but it greatly alters the main character of the tragedy. While the Shakespearean tragedy was built upon the justification of the sacrilege caused by defying the Chain of Being, Bharadwaj's Maqbool was a clear case of the theory of Karma coming to a full circle.

Alex Perry in a review of the movie discusses the reason for the efficiency of the adaptation into an Indian setting: "Bhardwaj's extraordinary adaptation works because the themes of ambition and contrition, politicking and deception fit seamlessly into modern Indian life." (2014) The sacred king Duncan is replaced by the mafia don Jehangir Khan, popularly addressed as Abbaji. Macbeth turns into Miya Maqbool, Abbaji's right hand and henchman. The twist to the play is added by the introduction of Nimmi, whose character traits and function resemble Lady Macbeth, but Bharadwaj has broadened her character, for she is Abbaji's mistress and secretly loves Maqbool. Maqbool too loves Nimmi but refrains from professing his love because Abbaji is a father figure to him. For Banquo, we have Kaka and for Fleance, we have Guddu who gets betrothed to Abbaji's daughter Sameera. Maqbool is Abbaji's courageous lieutenant who shoots and gets shot at for him. Kaka too, holds high esteem in the gang but he is second to Maqbool. The director Vishal Bharadwaj, interestingly makes use of corrupt-clairvoyant cops- Pandit and Purohit in place of the weird sisters who provide direction to the course of events with their tricking prophecies, comment on it like a chorus and also are a source of some humour in the otherwise grim affairs.

The plot is not just adapted to the setting of Mumbai mafia but also greatly appropriated by including the Muslim background to the plot. The inclusion of the double love stories—

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Maqbool and Nimmi and of Guddu and Sameera, use of prophesying policemen, and the handling of characters and plot deftly layering them with subtle nuances with the use of Urdu language and traditions that provides the film its real merit. And it is these three aspects that I shall stress on.

The film's opening is as gruesome as the play's with the clairvoyant-cops drawing a kundli and prophesying the ill fate of Mumbai and setting the note of the play by the dialogue "*Saari Mumbai khon se bhar di*" (The whole Mumbai is filled with blood). In the words of Amrita Sen, "Set in Mumbai, Maqbool charts the rise and ultimate destruction of Miya Maqbool (Irfan Khan), the principal henchman of Abbaji, alias Jahangir Khan (Pankaj Kapoor). The confusion of moral order at the heart of the witches' chant in Macbeth's opening act reverberates throughout the movie. Mumbai appears more in the clutches of gangsters rather than legitimate political authorities"

Maqbool and Kaka return victorious from a gang war-destroying Abbaji's chief opponent and assemble at the farmhouse where the corrupt cops meet the victorious duo and foretell them the future— Miya Maqbool is to reign Mumbai within the coming six months, starting with Bollywood. This startles all present and Maqbool hiding his vicious desires, rejects it as mere foolery. The cops also prophesy that Kaka's son Guddu will be the heir to Abbaji's legacy and would be a match to Maqbool. The cops thus bring out what lied latent in Maqbool's heart; his ambition to rise to the highest position and his fear of Guddu. Unlike the original play where the action is swift, the film is more complex. The characters of Nimmi and Maqbool come to forefront on the trip to dargah and then again when Maqbool instigates Abbaji against Guddu and later at the farmhouse. As soon as the cops spell out Maqbool's latent desire his mind starts working on it, hiding his real intensions and projecting himself as Abbaji's faithful. Nimmi, like Lady Macbeth, works and excites him further. Her trump card was to make Maqbool realise that if he does not act on time, he would lose both her and the position of Gang leader to Guddu who would marry Sameera and inherit the 'throne' rightfully. This baffles Maqbool and he tries to put Guddu out of his way by asking Abbaji to send him to Malaysia citing his affair with Sameera as the reason. But the trick falls back on him and Abbaji accepts Guddu as his son-in-law and announces their engagement. Noteworthy here is the use of contrast that Bharadwaj employs to stress the duplicity of the protagonists; the innocent romance of Guddu and Sameera is contrasted against the simmering passion of Maqbool and Nimmi, the family and the whole of Abbaji's gang prays at dargah, say namaz, and perform niyaz and execute their enemies with the same vigour and ease. One very stark contrast employed by the director is the scene between Nimmi and Maqbool after they spend the night together at the farmhouse. Nimmi says the namaz at dawn and as soon as she is over with it she starts coaxing Maqbool to murder Abbaji. This is in

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contrast to Lady Macbeth who, though claims to pluck out her gumless child from her bosom had she resolved to do so, could not really muster the courage to kill the sleeping King herself because he resembled her father. The juxtaposition of these innocent and evil images and events are in contrast to the original play where the readers have a sense of foreboding from the beginning.

It was at the farmhouse where the engagement party was held that Nimmi finally convinces Maqbool to murder Abbaji. The filmsy wall of moralism shatters when Maqbool learns from Purohit that years back Abbaji too had killed his own mentor and Gang leader to acquire his current position. But no sooner did he acquiesce to the act, that he starts hallucinating seeing blood spilled all over. When Maqbool shoots at sleeping Abbaji, the blood splatters on Nimmi's face. It is this blood that seeps in her mind later in the movie and which eventually makes her crazy. The duo gets away with the murder initially passing the blame to the faithful aide of Abbaji whom he had earlier offended by making him drink alcohol, yet they could not stand the guilt for long and collapse under its pressure. And it is here where Bharadwaj, the director has gone wrong. Duncan was a King and a good one. Macbeth had reasons not to betray him.

This Duncan

Hath bourne his faculties so meek, hath been

So clear in his great office, that his virtues

Will plead like angels trumpet-tongued, against

The deep damnation of his taking-off

(Act I Scene vii lines 16-20)

Macbeth betrays his King only for his "vaulting ambition". Asimov in his *Guide to Shakespeare* enlists the reason for Macbeth's guilt:

Each new king became king by the rigid succession of birth...Such a legitimate king was, in effect, chosen by God, since it was God who allowed him to be born in the right fashion to make his kingship inevitable. The King's rights were then obtained from God and he was accountable to no one else. This was the doctrine of the "divine right of kings." To kill a king in any society which believed in the divine right of kings was to commit the highest form of sacrilege. The killing was of God's deputy and, therefore, in a way, of God himself. (134)

But Maqbool and Nimmi had no such reasons; they were already murderer and mistress. They belonged to a world where killing and butchering and betraying was part of the day's business. Besides, Maqbool was only repeating history in killing Abbaji. If Abbaji could live a wholesome life with no qualms, why cannot Maqbool? Nimmi too, was also not being

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unfair to Abbaji; he had kept her as a mistress though he could have married her and now he had his interests invested in a new Bollywood starlet. Nimmi senses that she would eventually be swapped with her. Her life is as good as destroyed with Abbaji living or Abbaji dead. Amrita Sen has rightly observed, "...for Nimmi, murdering Abbaji amounts to more than mere ambition or revenge. Instead, it translates into survival, a shot at a life with the man she loves — Maqbool." (2014) Why the guilt then? The Macbeths were faithful people whose only fault was their ambition. But what makes the murderer and the mistress so conscientious suddenly? The inclusion of the love plot though a gripping addition injures the integrity of the plot.

The use of the clairvoyant cops in place of the three weird sisters that adds much vigour to the movie. Unlike the witches, they serve not only as agents of havoc, they are both agents of corruption, instigators of destruction as well as source of dark humour who "get their jollies playing all sides in the bloody gangland rivalries". (Perry) Like the chorus in Greek drama they provide the necessary background and commentary on the events. But they play a more active part in bringing out the hidden desires and fears of Maqbool by their slant prophesying and also manoeuvring the course of events "obsessed with maintaining cosmic balance" (Sen). It is they who provided the final push to Maqbool to murder Abbaji and it was them who helped Guddu in revenging on Maqbool. The employment of the cops who served the mafia more faithfully than the government also serves as a social criticism. Bharadwaj could have easily used the original supernatural elements and the Indian audience would have happily gulped it with good direction and cinematography but he chose to bring authenticity to his drama and substituted the weird sisters with the prophesying policemen and deserves our commendation for doing so.

Noteworthy is, also, the use of, a Muslim household setting with their *namaz* (prayer) and *niyaz* (offerings) and *dargah* (shrine) trips. As Blair Orfall observes,

The film is filled with Islamic signifiers, ranging from clothing and eating and fasting practices to a dramatized trip to a dargah, or Sufi temple, which includes a religious musical sequence. Bharadwaj's adaptation of Macbeth then is contemporized, indigenized, and Islamified, marking it as outside the dominant culture and re-coded through the traditions of the Western mafia film and its influence on Indian gang film.

Bharadwaj has certainly taken liberties with his Indian audience by making Abbaji a secular don who is ready to marry his daughter to a Hindu boy. However, what irks the viewer most is the guilty conscience of Maqbool and Nimmi. They were not defying the Divine Order by being faithful to their own desires rather were only following the path of their profession. The illegality of the mafia world cancels out the illegality of the love affair between Maqbool and

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Nimmi or their child as well as the killing of Abbaji. Bharadwaj thus, while marvelling at direction, cinematographic as well as acting fronts, have missed out a major link in the plot structure.

Locales, language and love are Bharadwaj's strategy to produce successful cinema. He reused these with his other Shakespeare adaptations *Omkara* (2006, based on *Othello*) and *Haider* (2014, based on *Hamlet*) as well. The relocation of the Shakespearean tragedy worked well with the audiences and the critics but Bharadwaj, according to me, should have paid closer attention to the psyche of his protagonist.

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