

MACBETH TO MAQBOOL: A STUDY IN TRANSMUTATION

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ABSTRACT

Cinematizing of the plays of William Shakespeare in India has been an outstanding and ground-breaking venture. The literary corpus of Shakespeare is an inexhaustible source of inspiration for countless people across the globe. When Shakespeare's writing is adapted on celluloid, it sets it ablaze, and transfers the audience to a cinematic utopia. Indian adaptation of Shakespearean plays can be comprehended to be a cultural exchange, a synthesis of East and West. From the nineties onwards, Indians have felt freer to approach Shakespeare. There is no longer the need to 'adapt', rather they can make bold to 'play' around with Shakespeare's text, and deconstruct it for their own needs, into the context of contemporary India. The art of cinematic adaptation in Indian cinema has been redefined by the Shakespearean trilogy of Vishal Bhardwaj. This paper is an attempt to study Vishal Bhardwaj's adaptation of Shakespearean tragedy Macbeth, into the Bollywood film Maqbool.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Bollywood; cinematic adaptations; Maqbool

1. Introduction:

Colonialism brought Shakespeare to the Indian subcontinent. India's extensive history of colonial domination extends to cultural domination. The colonial education system in India was filled with western texts, including Shakespeare. A proliferation of Western literature, mainly Shakespeare, within the colonial education system was important for a political reason too; for example, Shakespeare was included in the colonial curricula not only as the exemplary figure of literary and artistic greatness, but also because his works

demonstrated the core values of Western tradition (Weissbrod 2014). By the twentieth century, Shakespeare had been translated, adapted, and assimilated into many Indian languages and writers and performances in the general Indian cultural landscape were contributing to sustaining his presence. Theme, characterisation, genre, structure—there are many ways in which the works of Shakespeare have influenced and have been absorbed in Indian literature and culture.

2. Bollywood and Shakespeare

The world famous literary works of the Bard of Avon have for decades inspired the Bollywood films. When Shakespeare's writing is adapted on celluloid, it sets it ablaze, and transfers the audience to a cinematic utopia. Adapting Shakespeare's work to Indian ethos is the latest "in" thing in Indian cinema. From the nineties onwards, Indian filmmakers have felt freer to approach Shakespeare. There is no longer the need to 'adapt', rather they can make bold to 'play' around with Shakespeare's text, and deconstruct it for their own needs, into the context of contemporary India. Indian adaptation of Shakespearean plays can be comprehended to be a cultural exchange, a synthesis of East and West.

Veteran Indian actor Naseeruddin Shah had once said, "The roots may look lost, but every big story in the Hindi film industry is from Shakespeare" (Bhattacharya, 2014). Bollywood can be said to be bluntly Shakespeareesque in its temperament featuring song and dance, love triangles, comedy, melodrama, star-crossed lovers, angry parents, conniving villains, convenient coincidences and mistaken identities. Namrata Joshi, a film critic, noted regarding Shakespeare that, "Shakespeare's plays with their dramatic strength and superb portrayal of the universal truths of human nature, have always lent themselves well to adaptation to different times and places".¹ The indigenized version of Shakespeare's drama in form of movie adaptations requires thoughtful visualizations and aesthetic sensibility because a slight deviation can lead to a giant theatrical blunder. However, Indian filmmakers garnish European drama with Indian aesthetic nuances so as to make it palatable for the Indian audience. Masala is an Indian concept. But it describes to a tee what makes Shakespeare's plays – their styles, their idioms, and their audiences – so distinctive. Shakespeare's plays are well-flavoured, often hyperbolic mixtures attuned to the heat of passion; and it's this quality that has allowed Shakespeare to flourish in a vast country whose many peoples, religions, and languages embody what it means to be a masala mixture.

inspired by Shakespearean Macbeth in terms of events and the characterization; it is a classic tale of greed and ambition. Bhardwaj has transplanted Macbeth from the Scottish highlands into the Mumbai underworld. He has successfully co-related the events and happenings of the plays with the intrigues and conspiracy of the Mumbai underworld. Based in the underworld of Mumbai, the film is about the kind of power struggles that is a constant factor in the underbelly of the city. Abbaji played by Pankaj Kapoor in one of his finest works, heads a crime family. He has a young protégé Maqbool played by the talented Irrfan Khan. Bhardwaj's choice of actors points to his zeal of making serious cinema as opposed to popular commercial Bollywood flicks. Abbaji's mistress Nimmi played by Tabu, who fell from the favour of Abbaji owing to a younger woman, makes up for this loss by taking a love interest in the young Maqbool and instigating him to take Abbaji's place as the head by killing him. Borrowing from Macbeth's core theme, Abbaji who is the head of a crime family is murdered by his mistress Nimmi's ambitious lover Maqbool. The film successfully blended the basic plot structure of Shakespeare's play with popular gang land films of Bollywood.

According to Trivedi (2003, 104) the adaptation has certain points of convergence, as well as divergence with regard to the original piece of work. The film is much more than a mere cinematic representation. It is rather a new interpretation. Bhardwaj's Maqbool is shifted to the dark spaces of the Mumbai mafia popularly referred to as the underworld. The murder of rival gang lords is normalized in such a set up. The law of this land is similar to the era Shakespeare wrote about – the pre modern era. The era of Macbeth is marked by feudal laws which follows the strictures "Might is Right". The feudal order needs to be maintained and any subversion to that order leads to repercussions. While the underworld subverts the laws of modern state, it in turn is guided by a code of conduct which infuses the justice delivery mechanism amongst gangsters. Even this code of conduct is strictly followed and any deviation is met by strict punishment. By locating the film in Mumbai's underworld, the director stretched the possibilities of power, ambition and evil and how such imperatives are omnipresent. What is also interesting is the transformation of a royal persona of Macbeth into a gangster Maqbool. Such transformation of nobility to outlaws may convey a tinge of comic irony. This initially may seem far-fetched, however the complex issues that the great Shakespearean tragedy raises is not lost in Maqbool.

Maqbool's elaboration of the supernatural is also remarkable. In the narrative of Shakespeare, the witches play a crucial role in giving the narrative a shape. Shakespeare's three weird sisters/witches appear in the form of two

There is a famous quote by Vermer (2002, 102) who speaks about this great writer, "Shakespeare is strong on class structures and hierarchies, but these hierarchies have broken down in England. In Asia we still have these strong hierarchies. I'd say the best way to do Shakespeare and be true to him is through Asian eyes". So this is the greatness of Shakespearean drama that they are still adapted in all parts of the world and Bollywood cinema is not apart from this.

Post the year 2000, has started what can doubtlessly be called the golden age of Indian cinema. This is an obvious result of the rapid development in filmmaking techniques along with other peripheral advances like the huge leap in the development of the communication system in the internet age. Such rapid growth, along with the aid of certain other socio-cultural and economic factors, has almost completely changed the viewing practice of the urban audience. There is a gamut of audience for every kind of cinema. Owing to such reassuring conditions, producers are also more willing to experiment with both content and form of cinema and break free from the boundaries of the traditional storytelling modes and preferences. Also, Bollywood today readily finds at its disposal a widespread global audience, enjoys simultaneous international releases and higher ticket prices. The overseas market today generates 65 percent of a film's total income. Keeping these figures in mind, one may say that in the recent tumultuous years of global economic crisis, Bollywood perhaps enjoys a larger viewership than any other film industry in the world. In such times, artists with a sensibility steeped in literary and cultural tradition can afford to revisit old practices, and not merely grind their talent in mindless money churners.

The art of cinematic adaptation in Indian cinema has been redefined by the Shakespearean trilogy of Vishal Bhardwaj. He won big accolades in filmmaking specifically for his Shakespearean trilogy that consisted of three movies, *Maqbool* (2003), *Omkara* (2006), and *Haider* (2014). Bhardwaj does not indulge in rampant plagiarism, but on the contrary in many of his interviews he acknowledged his admiration of Shakespearean drama.

3. Macbeth meets Maqbool

The first movie of his trilogy called Maqbool was a genuine adaptation of Macbeth, and it is in this regard that film critic, Jain (2014), observes that, "Shakespeare hasn't got lost in translation here. Macbeth, a study in ambition and guilt, is perhaps one of the more accessible of the Bard's plays" (pg 27). They're not really adaptations; they are full reinterpretations that bring the Bard's plot lines into a new, uniquely Indian context. The plot of Maqbool is

corrupt clairvoyant policemen Pandit and Purohit, these corrupt policemen actively helped Abbaji in his illegal work. But these two not only predict what will happen as in the case of the witches, rather they themselves influence the turn that the characters lives would take. So one can say they act as supernatural agents obsessed with maintaining some kind of balance of power in the underworld to serve their own interest.

Coming to the pair of Maqbool and Nimmi, unlike Lord and Lady Macbeth, they are not married, hence rendering their love forbidden in the Indian social set up. As opposed to murdering solely for ambition, Maqbool is incited in many fronts by Nimmi who fell from favour with Abbaji. Nimmi's role turned it into a passion crime. Nimmi manipulated Maqbool by making him dream of taking Abbaji's place. However the remorse of what they did engulfs them completely. Nimmi dies during childbirth and Maqbool internalizes all his violent past deeds and dies at the hands of Riyaz Boti, another gangster.

The film is a masterpiece and offers some of the most imaginative and insightful visualisations seen in Hindi Cinema. Bhardwaj in this film manages to successfully recreate Shakespeare's original at the level of language, setting and plot without diluting the complexities raised by the original *Macbeth* (Kumar 2013). Bhardwaj's attention to the costume, accent, food, architecture and *tehzeeb* (culture and etiquette) typical of this culture is pointed and nostalgic. The film suggests, in its rich colouring and lilting music, a waning Muslim milieu in the wider context of India. Maqbool succeeds in the domestic as well as the international markets precisely because the film melds the betrayal and chaos portrayed in Shakespeare with the murky, sinister Mumbai underworld. The film includes the love plots so essential to mainstream Bollywood movies; simultaneously, however, Maqbool opens up questions of corruption, terrorism, and communal harmony that have taken the centre stage in recent Hindi films. William Shakespeare and the underworld evidently form a great mix – at least in Bollywood. 'Maqbool' is an Indianised version of Shakespeare's Macbeth in a different time and space. There have been many stage presentations of this play around the world. Some films have also been made but not in the Indian context. 'Maqbool' is a path setter in many ways and is a winner in terms of its presentation and style.

4. Conclusion

Human beings possess reason, but they are generally ruled by passions and emotions (the 'lower' and 'irrational' parts of the human psyche) (Kidnie 2009, 68-69). Literary texts disseminate ideas, but they do so by playing on our

emotions and desires. After reading the plays of Shakespeare and watching the adaptations by Vishal Bhardwaj, we can believe so. These adaptations do not tamper with the original text, and try to maintain the essential mood of the written text (Jane 2009). However, some changes are mandatory such as those of language translation, local setting, and certain other cinematic essentials. Cultural, geographic or ideological differences between work and adaptation are rooted in a perceived temporal gap between work and adaptation enabled by an idea of the work not as process, but as something readily identifiable instead as an object. This makes it clear that certain differences are unavoidable and that adaptations do lead to certain problems (Jain 2014). When a text is adapted for a film, it is trimmed to counter the issue of time and space. This shortening may lead to a quality compromise. The author's genuine intention is overlooked in such collaborative venture of movie-making, and often the participation of the viewer is strictly limited, contrary to the process of reading where a reader has the liberty to participate in shaping the meaning of the text.

To be inspired by Shakespeare and to adapt a film to one of his plays is common in world cinema. To adapt the play fully and faithfully to the local context takes genius says Hutcheon (2006). Working within mainstream commercial film industries, Bhardwaj has not only approached Shakespeare as an original material through which he can hold a mirror up to the world, he also opens up new ways of interpreting the original texts within more modern contexts. He has broken free with the tradition of Indian Shakespeares on screen by adapting full texts rather than merely referencing the plays, and by delving into the tragic genre, a category that is rare in Indian literature and art. He does this perhaps because times have changed – perhaps this is a postcolonial world and the genre of the Shakespearean tragedy, unlike others including realist film, provides the structure and distance to mourn the loss of the recent past – lost due to the homogenising effects of globalisation.

When “all the world's a stage” to the bard, Indian cinema has proven to be no exception. In the sub continental, as well as in a global context, Bhardwaj's films can be seen as works that string together disparate aspects of a global trans-cultural history of art, across mediums of expression, adapting the English master in a foreign tongue and still managing to keep both cultural elements intact with all their nuances and flavor.

While some people are tired of remakes and adaptations, there are others who enjoy them. Classics are adapted because they have an evergreen quality, and by adapting them filmmakers cast them in a more modern mould to keep them alive. Shakespeare captured human emotions like no other and that

is why he has captured the imaginations of people worldwide through generations.

Notes

1. Retrieved from <http://ijellh.com/cinematizing-shakespeare-study-shakespearean-presence-indian-cinema/>

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