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REINVENTING SHAKESPEARE'S *MACBETH* IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT: *MAQOOL* IN TIMES OF MUMBAI MAFIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to examine Vishal Bhardwaj's Maqbool as a Hindi film adaptation of Shakespeare's Macbeth, exploring how it translates the classic tragedy in modern Mumbai underworld context.

The study intends to highlight the film's innovative use of local settings, language, and cultural references, such as the role of astrology and the recasting of Shakespeare's characters with Muslim names. The comparison between Macbeth's relationship with Lady Macbeth and Maqbool's relationship with Nimmi is explored, focusing on themes of ambition, guilt, and the moral implications of 'pure' and 'impure' love in the Indian context. The paper will also try to examine the film's structural fidelity to the original play, particularly in the depiction of key scenes such as the banquet scene and the hallucination of the dagger. Maqbool serves as a reflection on the inherent violence and corruption within the underworld and its ties to larger societal structures, offering a nuanced commentary on power and betrayal in contemporary India.

Keywords:

He was not an age, but of all ages,

Not of one country but of all countries.

- Ben Johnson

INTRODUCTION:

William Shakespeare wrote for the Elizabethton Stage and audience; but is read, watched and enjoyed the world over even today. His universal appeal lies in his capacity to lift the narrow world of the story to a higher, wider and vaster world. Shakespeare in his plays constantly generalizes (i.e.) constantly moves from the particular to the general. Thus, the particular story of a play becomes a part of the general story of mankind and his characters a part of the panorama of humanity which continues "unbroken from generation to generation". His in-depth piercing study of characters coupled with practical wisdom and philosophical truths, his ability to foreground human drama in the larger scheme of powerful mysterious forces lurking beyond the world of reason & senses gives his works a cosmic significance.

It is because of this universal appeal that Shakespeare has been revered and is a perennial source of inspiration for directors the world over. Before Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* several of Shakespeare's plays have been adapted for screen by directors from all parts of the world.

Polanski, Kurosawa, Orson Welles, Andra Wajda and even a few Hindi filmmakers to mention a few have worked on adapting different plays by Shakespeare. Along with *Hamlet, Othello and King Lear, Macbeth* has been adapted for the screen by several film makers. Adaptations of Shakespeare by Hindi film industry go back to 1968 adaptation of *Comedy of Errors* by Kishore Kumar which was remade in 1981 by Gulzar. Mansoor Khan's *Qayamat se Qayamat tak* (1988) is an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* which was once again adapted by Priyadarshan in *Hulchul* (2005). Maqbool is however the first adaption of *Macbeth* by Hindi film industry even though it remains an all time favorite with directors and has adapted several times in many innovative ways.

Vishal Bhardwaj, a filmmaker and composer of Bollywood scores has achieved considerable popularity and critical acclaim for his three adaptations of Shakespeare, Maqbool (Macbeth) and Omkara (Othello) and more recently Haider (Hamlet). Bhardwaj's success lies in his ability to have indigenized Macbeth at the level of setting, plot, language and generic conventions without diluting the complex issues raised by Shakespeare's Macbeth.

The medium of film definitely has an advantage over the theatrical performance as more people can view it. Drawing attention to this recent trend of appropriation of Shakespeare Dennis Kennedy opines:

"Commodity culture does not want Shakespeare. It wants Shakespeare without Shakespeare… Shakespeare has at last become a 'universal' figure – not as humanists mean the term, but as it means in the millennial marketplace (Qtd in Aebischer, Esche and Wheale 2003 : 36)"

Different film productions uses his plays as a pretext for their own culture and negotiations that are more immediate concerns in their contexts thereby decentering Shakespeare himself. This is apparent in the change of actual text and geographical location. Unlike Macbeth written for 17th C audience Set in 11th C Scotland Maqbool is set in 21st C Mumbai & meant for 21st century Indian audience.

The fidelity to the actual text is one of the issues that emerges most pressingly and it is pertinent that while judging a film adaptation we have to understand the representational difference between the two media – theatre and cinema. Each time Shakespeare is put into new textual forms, and new historical and cultural contexts there are negotiations that take place with the 'original' play. Coming to the particular case of

the play and film under consideration we see that barring a few differences the two narratives dramatize a trait prevalent across culture and historical periods. While *Macbeth* reveals the structural flaws that exist in the state's organization (Scotland of 11th C) of itself, resulting in dissidence, Maqbool indicates that any organization (here the underbelly of Mumbai) that is an image of the State's Structure too suffers from dissidence because of the inherent flaws in its organization.

Macbeth, the shortest of the four great tragedies of Shakespeare has a simple plot with no subplot, no episode & no digression whatsoever. The key-note of the play is struck in the very beginning with the seed of ambition being sown in *Macbeth*'s soul due to his chance meeting with the three witches. Duncan's visit to his castle coupled with his announcement of Malcolm as his heir to the throne and the fact he is married to Lady Macbeth set the wheels of the plot in motion. All these factors operate to transform Macbeth from a noble warrior and loyal subject and kinsmen into a cold-blooded murderer. Once Macbeth enters the world of crime one crime leads to another even as the action moves towards denouement. Suspicion against him grows and forces of opposition unite even as he meets his doom on the battlefield. If we look for concerns in this play, we see the focus on one major concern (i.e.) Crime and Overreaching ambition do not pay and is followed by punishment with logical inevitability.

Maqbool has Mumbai underworld as its backdrop where Maqbool is the right hand man of Abbaji, a powerful underworld Don having been brought up by him like a son.

Here we see a significant feature at work, prominent in Macbeth as well : Duncan/ Abbaji's authority sustains itself on the efficient discharge of their orders by Macbeth/Maqbool. A major departure from the Shakespeare text is Abbaji's mistakes, the Lady Macbeth of Maqbool. In the movie she is Abbaji's mistakes and in equal parts both innocent and deceptive. She is in love with Maqbool and hates Abbaji because of his age and wants to get rid of him. Maqbool reciprocates her feelings and she make full use of her feminine tears until Maqbool requites her romantic ideals and given him the ultimatum (Its me or Abbaji) in the context that it is Maqbool's sereritude to the Don (Abbaji) that is preventing their relationship from blossoming. However she has no aspiration liken lady Macbeth to be unsexed. Maqbool get away with the murder and takes over in contest of Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, Nimmi is feminine her suggestions are withered softly and her desire for children is the core of her plan. Her pregnancy eventually ignites the desire of Maqbool to short Abbaji and the couple arranges the murder to appear to have been done by Abbaji's personal bodyguard as Don, just as planned. However both he and Nimmi are haunted by guilt, seeing Abbaji's ghost and unable to wash the blood from their hands much as in Macbeth. There is suspicious within the gang of Maqbool's role in Abbaji's death and the lovers meet a tragic end.

If we by and analysis at the level of relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Nimmi's weeping and insisting Maqbool to admit that their love in pure servers has no parallel in Macbeth but servers in the Indian western the films colloidal purpose i.e. to warm of the dangers of impure relations just as the Shakespeare text in replaced by a Hindi vernacular so is the concept of 'pure' and 'impure' relationship are added to give it our own cultural fragrance. Although Maqbool has been read as a political venture for Bollywood's inclusion in the global economy, the film simultaneously rehearses the primary traditions and interests of Indian culture. Accordingly Shakespeare's characters are given Muslim names in the movie and great each after with 'Salaam' and 'Khuda Hafiz', honour prayer time, wear skull cops and use Urdu Hindi/ under vocabulary. Astrology- the Indian equivalent of witchcraft is the means by which Maqbool's rise and falls are predicted even as the two corrupt policeman (the equivalent of the three witches) predict Maqbool's rise to power by means of horoscopes.

The Policeman also predict that Maqbool will be safe as long as the sea does not enter his house. But what happens is that the customs agents foil a vital smuggling deal at the port and raid Maqbool's house hoping to arrest him. Instead they find Nimmi's dead body who had given birth to a child - whether it is Abbaji's or Maqbool's remains a mystery. When Maqbool wanting to flee with his newborn child sees it being taken care of by Guddu and Sameera, he decides to relinquish the life of crime and violence. He is killed and his dying impressions are conveyed by a gradually reddening screen even as noises of commotion gradually fade into nothingness – a beautiful cinematic representation of Macbeth famous speech:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day

To the last syllable of recorded time;

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools

The way to dusty death. Out, out brief Candle,

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage.

And then is heard no more. It is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury

signifying nothing

The film received much critical appreciation and its economy of narration, its focus on Abbaji-Maqbool (ie Duncan-Macbeth) relationship that make Abbaji's murder more loaded then it would have been if Abbaji was not a father figure to Maqbool have been specially mentioned by critics (Poonam Trivedi (2007) and Daughter Lanier (2007). The ingenious recasting of the three witches as corrupt policeman having connection with the under would is indeed remarkable another reinvention is the Maqbool-Nimmi love affairs as forbidden romance and here we have the director Vishal Bhardwaj very subtly showcasing the Indian priorities about virginity, marriage and gender roles and an addition of the consequence of 'pure' and 'impure' relationship added to spice up the plot with Indian fragrance. Indeed all the characters Maqbool, Abbaji, Nimmi and others are all caught in the web of ambition as well as sexual desire. Maqbool is driven to kill Abbaji as much by his love for Nimmi as by his resentment to the idea over being under Guddu who is to become heir to Abbaji's gang because of his marriage to Sameera. His motivation is further strengthened when he learns of Abbaji

having murdered his mentor.

We find a radical reworking of the relationships tying Abbaji, Nimmi and Maqbool and the second half of the film following Abbaji's murder "closely parallels Macbeth in plot, Motifs and character "opines Lanier (Lanier 2007, 217). One cannot but help admire the ingenuity of Bhardwaj's adaptive approach as one compares some of the most important scenes of the play to the movie.

Act III scene IV of the play popularly known as the banquet scene is set in the banquet ball of Macbeth's palace in Forres where Banquo is supposed to be the guest of honour. It is here that Macbeth receives the news that Banquo has been murdered but Fleance, his son has escaped. Though agitated Macbeth returns to the feast and wishes that Banquo was also there and his wish is ironically fulfilled by the appearance of the Ghost who goes on to sit on the seat left vacant for Macbeth.

This banquet scene is very skillfully replace in *Maqbool* by a meeting of Maqbool's gang from which Guddu and Kaka (Fleance and Banquo) are missing. It is only Maqbool who becomes disturbed looking at Kaka's dead body when as he feels and dears his staring gaze which is linked to Abbaji's dying gaze focused at Maqbool. His blood had splashed on to Nimmi who like her counterpart Lady Macbeth cannot rest in peace thereafter and becoming increasingly obsessed with imaginary blood stains as the movie progresses.

Another interesting reworking is the recasting of Macbeth's downfall with the foiling as the forces opposed to Macbeth have gathered near Beinam wood and Malcolm orders that each of his soldier should cut a bough from the trees, and carry it before him in order to hide their numbers and thus deceive the enemy.

In Maqbool this foiling is done by the port authorities even as Maqbool tries to offload contraband and subsequently his home is raided. The coming of the sea is the flim's parallel to the Brinam Wood, a parallel that would have had to be given up considering the location i.e. Mumbai if any attempt had been made at literal transposition.

Different adaptations of Macbeth have often revoked at the play's ending. While some of them like William Davenant, who wrote a Restoration of Macbeth and Giuseppe Verdi, who adapted Macbeth into an era of the same name have emphasized a return of order after chaos, others such as Roman Polanski, a Polish director, who made a film of the same name in 1971 and Eugene Lonesco, who wrote a satire entitled Macbeth have depicted a cyclical pattern of violence. In Maqbool however Bhardwaj chooses to tread on a middle path. On the one hand we have Guddu and Sameera taking care of Nimmi's new born child – an act of humanity that transcends personal and gang enmities and rivalries and on the other hand we have the Mumbai underworld that remains as corrupt and as violent as ever with no hope of redemption.

But even more glaring in the fact that it is probably the person who is most loved and trusted is the one who betrays in the end. In Maqbool who has been brought up like a son by Abbaji who kills him even as Abbaji had killed his own mentor.

The cauldron and the dagger scenes are two very important visual scenes and *they too have been used by Vishal Bhardwaj* realizing their significance Bhardwaj has incorporated them in the movie in different way yet they serve much the same purpose as they do in the original text. The day before Abbaji's murder, Maqbool is seen cooking food for the guests in a huge cauldron as he plots the murder in his mind. He then starts to hallucinate and sees blood coming out of the cauldron that gives further incitement for the act he is planning to commit. In the play Macbeth it is Act II scene I that Macbeth hallucinates and sees a blood-stained dagger which points to the room where Duncan is sleeping:

In this a dagger which I see before me/ The handle toward my hand? /Come, let me clutch the/ I have thee not, and yet I see thee still….

Thus, while Bhardwaj departs from the Shakespearean text at the literal level he manages to convey the same agitation, the over excited, hallucinating brain, the upheaval in the moral order of that engulfs Macbeth's soul.

Macbeth killed Duncan to become the king i.e. to become all powerful. Contemporizing and Indi ginning the same, the film suggests that the Mumbai mafia are the true rulers and have a strong behind the scene presence in almost all aspects of life from politics to film industry itself. In fact Abbaji had made Maqbool responsible for negotiating all deals with Bollywood stars as a reward for his loyalty. The city as represented in the film is a combination of a "practiced place" and a place involved with "complex and sensuous existence beneath the spatial codes of mapping and depiction". It is not only a collective way of life but also the business empire created by the underworld leaders, the nexus between the underworld and the film industry, where financing of films and smuggling of illegal drugs construct the king making process. (Trivedi, 6)

Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* is not merely an adaptation but an indigenized retelling of *Macbeth* that preserves the essence of Shakespeare's tragedy while making it culturally resonant for Indian audiences. By replacing Scottish monarchy with the Mumbai mafia, witches with astrologers, and regal ambition with underworld power struggles, the film demonstrates the timeless relevance of *Macbeth's* themes.

Moreover, Bhardwaj's approach aligns with the global trend of adapting Shakespeare's works by recontextualizing them to reflect contemporary issues. While *Macbeth* explores the corrupting influence of power in medieval Scotland, *Maqbool* critiques modern-day crime syndicates and the inescapable cycles of violence that plague such systems. The film also adds a deeply personal layer to the protagonist's downfall, emphasizing love, betrayal, and moral decay.

Ultimately, *Maqbool* stands as a testament to Shakespeare's enduring influence, proving that his works transcend time and geography. Bhardwaj successfully reinvents *Macbeth* by balancing fidelity to the original text with creative deviations that root the narrative in Indian socio-cultural reality. This adaptive approach allows *Maqbool* to maintain Shakespeare's tragic vision while simultaneously offering a fresh perspective tailored for contemporary audiences.

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