

From Birnamwood to Bollywood: Maqbool and the Shakespearean Bandwagon

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to understand the appearance and disappearance of Shakespeare in the culture industry and appreciate the malleable cultural resources that Shakespeare has to offer. The article recognizes the potential of adaptive transformation of a literary text that critically engages both with the original and with the different social and cultural circumstances of the new productions. In particular, it looks at the adaptation of Shakespeare's Macbeth and the niche-marketing of Maqbool in a Jamesonian 'late capitalist' milieu. On the one hand, the adaptation can be viewed as a cannibalization of Shakespeare in which the Scottish legend of regicide becomes parallel to the power grappling in the Mumbai underworld. On the other hand, the film adaptation can be seen as an intellectual participation in a critical discourse that blurs the distinction between 'high culture' and 'low culture'. The paper argues that Vishal Bhardwaj's clever and creative adaptation of the original plot has given Shakespeare both topical and tropical colouring, but goes on to question the validity of such an endeavour.

William Shakespeare, the time-traveller, has reached the gateway to India apparently with a lost passport. His characters have received extreme makeover to blend in with 'Bollywood': Macbeth has become Maqbool (dir. Vishal Bhardawaj 2003), Othello has become Omkara (dir. Vishal Bhardawaj, 2006), Lear is set to see his last (The Last Lear, dir. Rituparna Ghosh, 2007), and Life Goes On for Lear (dir. Shangeeta Datta, 2010). These adapted characters are so different from their original that it is often difficult to trace Shakespearean DNA in these Indianised versions. Yet their presence indicates the emergence of a 'cultural capital', to use Pierre Bourdieu's term, which both uses and abuses their creator Shakespeare for its profitability. In his review of The Use and Abuse of Shakespeare, Antonio DiMatteo points out:

In digitized, (mis) appropriated, adapted, regurgitated, counterfeited and adulterated forms, the cultural capital of the new niche marketed ('right priced' and 'made easy') Shakespeare has been firmly unmoored from his First Folio home that once imagined domain of the sovereign poet. The more he comes to life in the media, the more he seems to disappear (DiMatteo, 186).

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It needs to be added though that the Bollywood rendering of Macbeth follows a long tradition of screen adaptation. Orson Welles's *Macbeth*, for example, is set among Stonehenge-like ruins. Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* depicted Macbeth as a murderous medieval lord from Japan. Roman Polanski's film adaptations of the film, sponsored by Playboy Productions, made Lady Macbeth sleepwalk in the nude. Films such as *Joe Macbeth*, *Men of Respect*, *Scotland PA* among many others have reworked Macbeth and addressed its dark potential in different parts of the world. Such a condition reminds one of "Everything and Nothing" by Jorge Luis Borges in which Shakespeare is paradoxically everyone and no one.

Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* (2003) loosely follows Shakespeare's story-line of Macbeth in which a man aggressively pursues his vaulting ambition under the influence of a woman. The presence of the weird sisters that added a supernatural dimension to the murder motif in Shakespeare is rationalized, and comically represented through two corrupt police officers who become iconic of an evidently 'foul' force under the surface of a supposedly 'fair' legal system. They are 'foul' characters who become the 'fair' weather friends. The blurring of the fair and foul (i.e., appearance and reality) sets the tone for Macbeth, and it remains one of the central themes both in Shakespeare's text and in its Bollywood version. The highland palace intrigue

²For a detailed list of film adaptations of Macbeth, see, http://www.xomba.com/adaptations_of_macbeth_in_film and regicide are replaced by the killing of the kingpin of the Mumbai underworld. King Duncan and his protégé Macbeth are presented as 'Abbaji' Jehangir Khan (played by Pankaj Kapur) and Maqbool (played by Irrfan Khan) respectively. In Shakespeare, Macbeth is regarded as a distant cousin and a trusted noble warrior of King Duncan. But in Bhardwaj's depiction, Maqbool is a foundling whom Abbaji has reared as his own son and made his loyal sidekick. Unlike King Duncan, the character of Abbaji is fleshed out and made to serve a more humane purpose. He is a father, lover and leader as opposed to King Duncan who is merely a recipient of battle information and an eventual murder victim. Abbaji's relationship with Maqbool is based on mutual reverence, but is complicated by their love for Nimmi. When Abbaji cheats on Nimmi, Maqbool gets the final motivation to kill his father figure. Thus the murder attains a psychological dimension with a possible Oedipal nuance. This is in addition to its political/financial/social concern. Bhardwaj invites more sympathy from the audience for Abbaji than his prototype King Duncan who has a rather two-dimensional textual existence. But the real reason for Maqbool to kill Abbaji (as is the case with Macbeth) remains greed.^t

When Abbaji's daughter Sameera (Masumeh Makhija) plans to get married to Kaka's (Piyush Mishra, Banquo) son Guddu (Ajay Gehi, Fleance), Maqbool realizes that his chances of inheriting Abbaji's place as the 'Don' of the Mumbai underworld is impossible. The only way to attain his dream is to annihilate everyone that comes in his way.

The necessary impetus to change his condition comes from an unlikely source: Nimmi (Tabu, Lady Macbeth), Abbaji's mistress who loves young and 'macho' Maqbool and would hate to see Guddu become the next 'Don'. Nimmi's instigations and taunts have the same effect that Lady Macbeth had over her husband. When Macbeth hesitates to kill

Duncan, Lady Macbeth compares him to the proverbial cat that would like to have the fish, but would not dare to wet its feet:

And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would'
Like the poor cat i' the adage" (I.vii.42-45).

Similar to Lady Macbeth, Nimmi hurts the manliness of Maqbool and instigates him to carry on with the murder. Thus the passing remarks of two corrupt police inspectors (played by Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri) suddenly become prophetic of Maqbool's rise to the top of the Mumbai underworld and his consequent tragic fall.

Reviewing the film for Time, Alex Perry observes, "Bhardwaj's extraordinary adaptation works because the themes of ambition and contrition, politicking and deception fit seamlessly into modern Indian life." Perry quotes the director, who opines, "You can place this story anywhere... in the army, in a bank, in journalism. It's a vicious, furious, bleak story. It's human" (Web). As it turns out, Bhardwaj has not chosen a bank or newsroom but the Muslim underworld of Mumbai. In so doing, he contributes to the stereotype as well as to the post 9/11 paranoia in which the Muslims are involved in the terror nexus, and strikes a raw nerve in Maharashtra politics. Then again, Shakespearean England was ripe with Catholic-Protestant rivalry that parallels the Hindu-Muslim in the sub-continent.

Clearly Bhardwaj has used his poetic license to subvert Shakespeare and investigate human nature and free it from its niche in British history. Shakespeare based his tragedy on Holinshed's Chronicles, and the historical and political reality of his time restricted Shakespeare from changing history. Staged in 1611, his main concern seems to locate James VI as a descendent of Banquo, and therefore, establish the Scottish claim to the English throne. In so doing, he even made Macbeth a tyrant, which probably is historically incorrect. James VI's obsession with witchcraft and his idea of the divine right of a king are also considered to be the reasons for Shakespeare to incorporate the weird sisters as witches. Indeed, the sixteenth-century audience with its racial memory of witch hunting and witch hanging was receptive of such superstitious materials.

Bhardwaj's critical expedition is not constrained by any such historical/political reality. Although he indulges himself in the electoral issues of Maharashtra (the Indian state in which Mumbai is situated), his main concern is to detect an archetypal evil that pervades through party politics and power game. Now the question is: why does Bhardwaj need a story from a past that is tinged with the colonial legacy of the British Empire? He could have narrated his story independent of Shakespeare's Macbeth. Is it out of postcolonial mimicry that Bhardwaj reconstructs the canonical tale of Shakespeare? Or is it to make Shakespeare a commodity? These are the issues that need critical analysis, but beyond the scope of this short paper.

One possible explanation is that Bhardwaj has commodified Shakespeare in order to mediate the colonial past. In a postcolonial milieu this can be explained as an urge to find an 'authentic experience' of a colonial subject. In other words, the subject aspires to have an authentic experience in order to create a privileged critical location from where s/he can speak. However, such an 'authentic experience' can only be traced in a trans-cultural, rather liminal space. Colonial and neo-colonial realities have constructed a liminal space

in which different spheres of time and space clash with one another without resorting to any form of hierarchy. After a history of colonization transforms a post-colony's original culture, as Homi Bhaba has so deftly demonstrated in his *Location of Culture*, the hybrid postcolonial subject becomes a liminal figure between multiple sets of traditions. For such a postcolonial subject, history is not a rosary made out of "beads of sequential time ...seeking to establish serial causal connections" but a "homogenous course" that establishes the present (after Walter Benjamin) as a "time of the now" (Bhaba 6). Hence, the retelling of *Macbeth* is located in contemporary India. In addition, by making national Indian culture an amalgam of Hindu, Muslim and Western cultures, Bhardwaj further underlines the idea that 'authentic experience' can no longer be approached from a singular identity. Thus Shakespearean English identity is deconstructed by Bhardwaj in which the liminal space is explored. Its link to colonial heritage derived through its loose connection with canonical Shakespeare simply exposes the fallacy of authenticity. The textual experience therefore becomes self-reflexive in nature. In other words, Bhardwaj film narrative opens up a discourse that fractures the received experience of Shakespeare.

Maqbool, it can be argued, shares a discursive experience that critically engages with contemporary politics and sub-continental history. The film-maker Bhardwaj has tried to investigate the sociology and psychology of violence and offers the possibility of hope and reconciliation. Guddu's son, like that of Banquo, is promised to inherit power at the end of the film narrative.

As a musician, Bhardwaj makes the presence of his songs pertinent to the making of the text. The songs create certain inter-textuality and contribute to the plot even in the form of kitsch. On the one hand, the songs in the film parody the hackneyed use of irrelevant songs in most of the Bollywood films. On the other hand, they try to integrate them in the fabric of the film. The item-song 'Jhini mini jhini' is a case in point. It is a festive song featuring Nimmi and Sameera that spread the message of harmony and peace as an alternative to violence and tragedy. Conversely the item-dance number that depicts Abbaji's unfaithfulness towards Nimmi belies its commercial agenda and creates the tension and spurs *Maqbool* to murder the mob leader.

Maqbool not only allows Bhardwaj to shine as a music director but also showcases what an immensely talented filmmaker he is. His direction of the final scene in *Maqbool* is unlike what Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has to offer - while, indeed *Maqbool* does die at the end of the film, there is still a sense of hope, an order that is restored as Guddu and Sameera embrace *Maqbool* and Sameera's newborn baby. All of the scenes in *Maqbool* work together to develop this intricate (yet, at the same time, easy to follow) plot, and every single actor leaves a long-lasting impression on the audience. While it is true that all of the actors in *Maqbool* are gifted, even more gifted is Bhardwaj who brings the talent within these actors to the forefront.

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The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu forwarded the concept of cultural capital in the early 1960s. Broadly speaking, it refers to different types of cultural habits and dispositions that one inherits and that can be used to generate profits. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital exists in three distinct forms. In its "embodied" form, cultural capital is a "competence" or skill that cannot be separated from its "bearer". It seems that Bollywood has acquired Shakespeare as one of its cultural capital.

"In 1605, when King James I visited Oxford, he was greeted by three Sibyls as the descendant of Banquo. This was part of the Stuart political legitimating myth, which sought to provide the Stuarts with a proper ancestry, stretching back through Banquo to the first king, Kenneth Macalpine...With the accession of James to the throne, there was a surge of interest in Scottish history. Bullough tells us that the story of Macbeth and Duncan goes back to the early eleventh century, when Scotland had largely been unified and the ideas of nationality and kingship were gradually developing. After killing Duncan...Macbeth...reigned successfully for seventeen years. Shakespeare collapses those years into what might be a matter of weeks." Introduction by Tony Tanner in *Shakespeare, William. Tragedies Vol. 1* (ed) Sylvan Barnet. London: Everyman Library, 1992. p. xxxviii

James VI is the author of a book on witchcraft and witches, titled, Daemonology (1597).ibid. p