



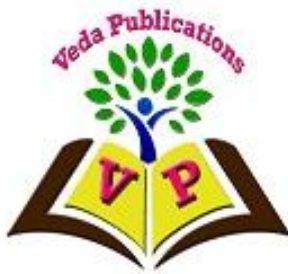
SHAKESPEARE ON SCREEN: A VIEW OF THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC ADAPTATION OF *MACBETH* INTO MAQBOOL

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ABSTRACT



The various renderings of Shakespeare's plays into various other art forms like stories, performances, songs, films and documentaries etc for over four hundred years stand testimony to their universality, relevance and appeal to human mind "of all times". This continued charm of The Bard is majorly due to the characters and emotions that they express and represent, which make his plays a perennial source of delight for scholars, artists, dramatists, storytellers and filmmakers alike. Cinema seems to be the most prominent among all the other art forms in which Shakespeare's plays have been adapted—both commercial and art. Almost all of his plays have been adapted into films across the globe in various languages. Coming to home ground, Bollywood also has some successful adaptations of Shakespeare's plays to its credit. The present paper is an analysis of the cinematographic adaptation of *Macbeth* into *Maqbool* (2003), a film directed by Vishal Bhardwaj who is particularly known for his love for the Bard, having made a trilogy on his plays. The paper also discusses some theoretical formulations on cinematographic adaptation.

Keywords: *Shakespeare, Cinema, Cinematographic/film Adaptation, Macbeth, Maqbool,*

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"He was not of an age but for all time", it was not for nothing that Ben Jonson asserted this about Shakespeare, and the various approaches towards his plays over the years across times and places stand a testimony to this statement. The universality of his plays, being read, taught, staged, enacted and adapted to other forms of art even today is unquestioned as his characters expressed emotions that would equally appeal to Elizabethan audience as well as contemporary readers. Shakespeare's continued appeal derives from the fact that we can relate to these characters and emotions as evident from the contemporary renditions and interpretations of his plays. Of the many conceivable art forms in which his plays have been adapted, cinema seems to be an influential one. The interest has continued right from the early days of cinematographic history and remains unabated even in present times as the number of adaptations of his plays into films continues to increase. Talking of home ground, Indian cinema also boasts of some successful adaptations of Shakespeare's plays as the Bard has found many admirers in Bollywood. Veteran actor Naseeruddin Shah who has done Shakespeare many times had once said, "the roots may look lost, but every big story in the Hindi film industry is from Shakespeare."ⁱ One may feel tempted to endorse that statement looking at the myriad colours of character portrayals in our films featuring love triangles, melodrama, star crossed lovers, scheming villains, convenient coincidences, mistaken identities etc as all this is so essentially Shakespeare in its true spirit. Some of the successful adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in Bollywood include *Angeer*, *Uta Pulta*, *Do Dooni Chaar* (based on *Comedy of Errors*) *10ml Love*, (a funny rendition of *Midsummer Night's Dream* by giving it a setting of a big punjabi wedding to suit Indian sensibilities) and *Qayamat se Qayamat Tak*, and *Ramleela* (based on *Romeo and Juliet*). Director Vishal Bhardwaj is specially known for his love for the bard and though he was not the first one to have adapted and interpreted Shakespeare, his trilogy of *Maqbool* (2003), *Omkaara* (2006) and *Haider* (2014) based on *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Hamlet* respectively can undoubtedly be considered the most reputed and celebrated adaptation in Bollywood. However, this paper

particularly offers an analysis of the cinematographic adaptation of *Macbeth* into *Maqbool*, along with other nuances of adaptation such as the question of "faithfulness" of the adaptation with the source, its affinity with and departure from the source and also interpreting and understanding the adaptation in the light of the theoretical framework given by some critics.

Maqbool was released in 2003 and it is an adaptation of Shakespeare's Classic play *Macbeth*. There had been several film adaptations of *Macbeth* by filmmakers across the world, Hollywood has attempted *Macbeth* in the past. Roman Polanski's *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* and Greg Lombardo's *Macbeth in Manhattan* being some prominent examples. But in the history of Indian cinema, no work had been done to adapt this play for an Indian film in an Indian environment. Vishal Bhardwaj did it with *Maqbool*, which is not an attempt to simply re-tell the story of *Macbeth*, but to rediscover it in our times and condition. In Bhardwaj's own words:

"Inspired by Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, It is a gripping film that reexamines life and its dilemmas. It is about choice and consequences. It is set in the real world of real people. *Maqbool* says that wrong ambition and greed lead to downfall".ⁱⁱ

If Shakespeare's works are the quintessential embodiment of English literature, in the same way, *Maqbool* is a perfect example of adaptive cinema. It captures the spirit of the original in the guise of innovation and intelligence. *Maqbool*, who plays *Macbeth*, is the most trusted aide and loyal of Jahangir Khan aka Abbaji who plays King Duncan. Two corrupt police cops Pandit and Purohit play the 'witches'. Pandit is an astrologer with 'kali zubaan', everything he foretells comes true. He predicts that *Maqbool* will be the successor of Abbaji. This prediction gradually infuses an insatiable appetite for power within *Maqbool*. He harbours lust and love for Nimmi (who is a parallel to Lady *Macbeth*). Nimmi is Abbaji's mistress, and believes that only *Maqbool* can grant her the social respect that comes with marriage. She repeatedly hints the death of Abbaji to *Maqbool* and also warns *Maqbool* of the relationship between Abbaji's daughter and



Guddu (a parallel to Fleance), son of Kaka(Banquo), Maqbool's best friend. Just like Lady Macbeth, Nimmi keeps nudging Maqbool that since Abbaji has no son, the son-in-law (Guddu) would be the successor of Abbaji and hence, he should try to stop that from happening. Eventually, Nimmi is able to convince Maqbool to murder Abbaji and crown himself the new leader of the gang. Upon Maqbool's gaining control, the under-world begins to shatter to pieces as everyone involved with the gang is inclined to think that Nimmi and Maqbool have spearheaded Abbaji's murder. Kaka disassociates himself from the gang, Maqbool gets deeply buried in debt, kills Kaka and tries to kill Guddu also, but like Banquo's son Fleance, he escapes. Nimmi gives birth to Maqbool's child and starts hallucinating about the dead people. She goes mad and is dead in the end. Maqbool too, meets the same fate.

The similarities between the play and film are quite evident, the characters and scenes such as the famous opening scene with witches and their predictions, banquet scene, Maqbool and Nimmi's illusions and hallucinations etc clearly hint at the original Macbeth in some way or the other. Also making Nimmi (equivalent to Lady Macbeth) Abbaji's mistress sufficiently increases her wicked and manipulative nature. She is menacing and seductive, but keeps an innocent look on her face, making herself even viler. The way she delivers her taunts is perfect. The depiction of her insanity is heart wrenching. Bhardwaj accords Nimmi much of the plot's twists and turns, she uses her sexual control over Maqbool ,plants the seed of murder in his head ,uses all her wits to cast her spell over him and Abbaji. She does justice to Lady Macbeth's character,. Her madness and guilt consciousness near the climax of the movie is parallel to lady macbeth's sickness in act V ,sc I. She keeps wiping her face for she thinks theres blood on it still, her cleaning the wall as she sees blood all over it reminds one of the scene when Lady Macbeth says " here's the smell of blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh oh oh"

The fact that Maqbool is a classic of Indian cinema and can be admired by anyone irrespective of its connection with the play is also true. At the same time, those who have read the play would be able

to appreciate the film even better. The metamorphosis from a post Elizabethan era to the underworld of Mumbai is done with considerable dexterity and ease, keeping the audience intrigued and awe inspired in the same way the play does as if the hundreds of years that the play and film are apart have no impact on the true spirit of Shakespeare, which is comprehensive and ubiquitous. The transition of time and age is so smooth and yet the characters have the same interplay of emotions and reactions, proving the play to be of truly universal significance, traveling well through space and time, across cultures, generations and mediums. Bhardwaj skillfully employs his imagination while adapting by catering to Indian sensibility keeping the essential spirit of the play intact. Though the film lacks the somber soliloquies of the play, yet the dialogues are serious and deeply meaningful. At the same time, there are loopholes and we certainly find a few things amiss in the film. While in the play we are introduced to a brave Macbeth by way of his emerging victorious in a battle , in the movie, there is nothing that shows why Maqbool is loved the most by Abbaji and what has he done to gain his status as Abbaji's right hand man. Nimmi's hallucinations appear abruptly in the movie as if just to make her look like Lady Macbeth by some way or the other. In spite of these glitches, the performances by the actors are extraordinary and that compensates for the snags.

Geoffrey Wagner divided film adaptation into three 'modes'ⁱⁱⁱ: a) the transposition, in which a work of literature is directly given on screen with a minimum of apparent interference, b) the commentary, where an original story is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect and c) the analogy, which must represent a considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art. Maqbool seems to be belonging to the second 'mode'.i.e. the commentary, as the movie shows some degree of deviation from the play to suit Indian sensibility and cater to the taste of this audience. Nimmi is shown as a mistress to Abbaji and a secret beloved of Macbeth (and not Maqbool's wife) probably because Indian audience likes to watch a romance rather than see it culminate in marriage and look at the characters as spouses



instead of sensational lovers. Some characters are shown less dynamic than they are in the play and vice versa. Also, in the movie, a surreal atmosphere is created by showing the characters' allegiance to Islam and their using of heavy Urdu at some places probably to make it go well with the setting of the Mumbai underworld and the characters to look realistic as gangsters. It is a well known fact that Hindi film industry is obsessed with Muslim-dominated Bombay underworld but here, the image of Islam is detailed. The casting of 'Pandit' in the role of witch was probably to balance the equation a bit. Inspector Pandit and Purohit are in the employ of Abbaji. For them future is tangible as present. For Pandit, the world is planetary chart meant to be animated by kababs, rainwater, sand etc. (which somehow corresponds to the charms of three witches in Macbeth Act IV. Sc. 1), and crafty Purohit can smooth talk anyone into doom. He tells Maqbool that in six months, he will reign over Abbaji's terrain. In making the police cops play the role of witches, Bhardwaj probably wished to highlight the link between corrupt police and underworld, making them the 'witches' of the present day world.

Then, the addition of Sameera (Abbaji's daughter whom we don't find in Macbeth) and Guddu romance works well in creating a solid difference between Maqbool and Macbeth. So, all these differences make Maqbool fall into the 'second mode' of film adaptation, as mentioned earlier. According to the French critic Jean Mitry^{iv}, the adaptation of a work of literature to film rests on the absurd assumption that there exists a content which can be transferred —transformed—from one form of expression to another. In other words, in adaptations, you express a different thing. Marie Saton, in her biography of Satyajit Ray specifically mentions this problem when she admits—

"Books are not primarily written to be filmed, if they were, they would read like scenarios; if they were good scenarios, they would probably read bad as literature."^v

In other words, both Geoffrey Wagner and Jean Mitry establish that it is inevitable for the cinematic adaptation to be different, in some way or the other, than the text/book/content from which it is adapted.

Another related issue with the process of adaptation is that in what way does it affect the original piece of art/literature. Does it impact it in a good or bad way? The answer lies in a) the purpose/principal objective of adaptation and b) the approach that the filmmaker chooses towards filming of a literary work. Maqbool' director Vishal Bhardwaj spoke about his purpose of adapting Macbeth, set in Mumbai's gangster world, at Toronto International festival in 2003 where the film was well received. He said "for a long time, I wanted to make a violent film so that I could deal with themes of great conflict. But I did not find interesting material. I wanted a story that focussed on human conditions. A few years ago, I saw Akira Kurosawa's 1957 classic "Throne of Blood" inspired by Macbeth. The film was my immediate inspiration. I read Macbeth many times and then started working with Abbas Tyrewala to adapt the play. Kurosawa adapted Macbeth to reflect his thoughts about a period in Japan. We wanted to make a film set in contemporary Mumbai. Macbeth in particular can be adapted to fit any period or setting, the corporate world politics, educational system or underworld."^{vi} Here, one may affirm that this particular adaptation has impacted the play Macbeth in a good way. The way the director chooses to approach towards the adaptation is to make a convoluted and otherwise ticklish play of Shakespeare accessible and understandable to people/audience, making the play Macbeth gain popularity in the process.

Then there is the notion of "fidelity" as emphasized by Joy Gould Boyum in the book, *Film into Fiction* saying, "...I've already suggested that the film should be considered faithful to its source"^{vii}, in other words, there are certain expectations from the filmmakers to retain the same status of the classic literary work and that the adaptation and its interpretation matches with that of the interpretation and similar response to the classical text, which gave it that status in the first place. Vishal Bhardwaj, choosing his words carefully on this subject, says, "the film is not meant for Shakespearean scholars. My co script writer and I knew that we are treading on a sensitive ground. We had to identify with the play's spirit and essence and retain them in film"^{viii}



In a way, the question of “fidelity” comes down to making the adaptation a work which is as powerful as the literary work itself. And Maqbool undoubtedly measures up to the criterion that makes it a powerful work. It is a standard in its own right in the world of adaptations. Brilliant performances by actors, simple yet impressive settings and awe inspiring direction makes it an exceptional work of art, winning wide acclaim from critics and analysts alike.

There are undoubtedly problems in adaptations and as long as popular and canonical literary works will be adapted to screens, the problem of “destroying the sanctity” of the literary work will continue to haunt us. There is no doubt that adaptations cannot match the merit of the original literary work but one possible solution to the problem could be looking at both the text and adapted version independent of each other, as separate works / pieces of art or one just as an inspiration from the other and not really comparing the two. Somdutta Mandal quotes Joy Gould Boyun saying,

“In assessing an adaptation, we are never really comparing book with film, but an interpretation with an interpretation. For just as we are readers, so implicitly is the filmmaker offering us, through his work, his perception, his visions, his particular insight into his source. An adaptation is always, whatever else it may be, an interpretation.”^{ix}

Henry James’ assertion that art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints also ably sums up the debate.

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