

Maqbool: **‘Adaptation’ of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*?**

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Maqbool (2004), directed by Vishal Bhardwaj, and based on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, has been a critically acclaimed film. Bhardwaj has transposed Shakespeare’s play, set in 11th century Scotland, to modern day India, and more specifically, to the Mumbai underworld. Though there is a similarity of plot, character and motif, the Indian adaptation makes some interesting changes: Lady Macbeth is shown as Nimmi, in love with Maqbool, but who is the mistress of the don, Abbaji; the three witches are represented by two corrupt, soothsaying cops, Birnam Wood becomes the sea, and Nimmi gives birth to a child at the end of the film.

Whereas Bhardwaj’s innovations as a transcultural adaptation are to be commended, this paper questions the moral structures that the director has superimposed onto the film. In *Macbeth*, the social structure is an accepted one; Duncan is a king who is God’s representative on earth, and regicide is considered one of the worst sins, since it upsets the balance of the universe. *Maqbool*, on the other hand, deals with a sub-culture, one that has its own set of ethical codes, it is true, but it is a structure that society is forced to accept out of fear, not love. What then happens to the moral world of Shakespeare’s plays, where goodness is often seen as absolute? Does Bhardwaj’s glamorization of love and violence dilute the moral power of the original play? This paper discusses some of these issues, and questions the word ‘adaptation’ applied to the film.

Maqbool (2004), directed by Vishal Bhardwaj, is, in the director’s own words, ‘based’ on Shakespeare’s tragedy *Macbeth*. Though the film did not do too well at the box office, it has been a film critic’s delight, with reviews ranging from approving, to positively adulatory: “Bhardwaj shows a good eye for visual compositions,” says one critic, and another, “The film is an outstanding effort...”, and proceeds to go into raptures over Tabu’s versatility. The director has transposed Shakespeare’s play,

set in 11th century Scotland, to modern day India, and more specifically, to the Mumbai underworld.

For those who have not seen the film, here is a brief summary of the plot. Jehangir Khan, or Abbaji, (King Duncan in the play) is the don of an underworld clan, whose power is absolute. His trusted henchman is Maqbool (Macbeth), who has been brought up by Abbaji. Complications arise when Maqbool and Nimmi, Abbaji's mistress, fall in love. As in the play, Nimmi persuades Maqbool to kill Abbaji, and seize power. What follows closely parallels *Macbeth*, when members of the clan turn against Maqbool, and kill him. The film, however, ends differently to the play, as Nimmi's child is adopted by Samira, Abbaji's daughter, and her husband, Guddu (Fleance).

Though there is a similarity of plot, character and motif between the play and the film, Bhardwaj has made some interesting changes. The film opens in an atmosphere of darkness and apprehension, reminiscent of *Macbeth*, except that here, the three witches are replaced by two corrupt, horoscope reading policemen (played by Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri) who predict Maqbool's rise to power. They appear on screen more often than the witches appear in the play, suggesting that the policemen are much more proactive agents of change and fatality than are the witches, who merely predict, not force the pace of events. What follows the opening is a rapid fire sequence of events, when the camera takes us into the home of Abbaji, introduces us to his gang and its code of loyalty, and reveals the connection between politicians, Bollywood and the underworld.

Bhardwaj also captures the general atmosphere of violence and suspicion that exists both with rival gangs, as well as within the gang itself. The mise-en-scene, with its focus on the large, comfortable interiors of Abbaji's home, the details of costume and ritualistic gesture, the clearly demarcated roles of men and women, are all meticulously observed by the director. His use of colour symbolism, too, is apt, but clichéd: Nimmi, Abbaji's mistress, wears white when she walks to the dargah, red when she is

seducing Maqbool, and so on, and images of blood, real and imagined, form an important trope in the film as indeed they do in the play.

At the heart of the plot of the film lies the love story of Maqbool and Nimmi. Bhardwaj has transformed the austere power of Lady Macbeth into a more passionate, erotically charged Nimmi (played by Tabu), who both cajoles and taunts Maqbool to act against his mentor. In *Macbeth*, the conflict lies between the protagonist's "vaulting ambition" and his loyalty to the king; in the film, there is this added dimension of love, so that the tensions grow between love for a woman, Maqbool's own ambition to be chief, and his love for, and loyalty to Abbaji, his mentor. These conflicts are played out for almost two-thirds of the film, slowing down its pace; after Abbaji is murdered, the film seems to almost gallop towards its denouement.

An added dimension to the film version is the child that Nimmi bears, and gives birth to. Whereas Shakespeare has underlined the fact of Macbeth having no heirs, and Macbeth being jealous of Banquo because the witches have predicted Fleance's rise to power, Bhardwaj has used the child (whose paternity is suspect) as a device to create an ending that is both touching as well as ambiguous. When the coastal customs officers raid Maqbool's home (here it is the sea, and not Birnam Wood that comes to destroy the protagonist), they find Nimmi dead. We next see Maqbool visiting the hospital where his child has been born; through the window he sees Guddu (Kaka's son, the Fleance of the movie) and his wife Samira (Abbaji's daughter) holding the child which they are about to adopt. It is a relieved Maqbool who leaves the hospital, after which he is gunned down by Boti, one of Abbaji's men. The ending could be read as redemptive (Maqbool's enemy adopts his son), or as ominous (the circular pattern of violence is continuous). The latter aspect has been emphasised by the iconic film version made by Polanski, when Donalbain covertly leaves the celebrations following Malcom's succession to the throne, and moves inexorably towards the chanting of the witches.

There are other aspects of Bhardwaj's transcultural 'adaptation' to be admired: his use of Urdu, as well as Bumbaiya Hindi spoken by the

largely Muslim gang members and by politicians and policemen; the assimilation of Bollywood-like song and dance routines, along with details of the underbelly of life in Mumbai. What leaves me feeling uneasy, however, is the moral framework used by the film director. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare uses an accepted social structure, where people recognize the divine right of kings, where Duncan is God's representative on earth, and where regicide is considered the gravest of sins, since it upsets the balance of the universe. The ethical framework is clear: Duncan is a king who is humble and honest, and killing him would mean that "his virtues/Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd, against/ The deep damnation of his taking-off". Shakespeare's world view, which reflects Renaissance thought, is one where the diseased ruler reflects the corrupt state, and, conversely, a kind and fair ruler is the symbol of a healthy kingdom.

What happens in Bhardwaj's *Maqbool*? He presents us with a sub-culture, the underworld, one that has its own set of ethical codes, it is true, but which is forcibly accepted by the public out of fear, not love. Again, if violence, revenge and underhand dealings form the premise of such a society, and its leader, a ruthless don, is killed by another ambitious gangster, who is in turn murdered by a violent member of the clan, it merely perpetuates a cycle of violence, one that temporarily rights the balance of power (the policemen/witches talk about the cosmic balance that must be maintained) NOT of goodness. The film focuses on what is rotten in the state of India, a condition mirrored in the ruthless and corrupt underworld don. To re-phrase Hegel, here is a conflict not between two partial goods, but between two partial evils.

Macbeth is, as we know, both the hero and villain of the play; what redeems him is his capacity for introspection and self-analysis, the medium for which is the soliloquy: it is the soliloquy that gives the play its moral power. He agonises over questions of loyalty and kingship, the philosophical consequences of the murder, the cosmic dimensions of the crime he is about to commit. We also see him develop from being "noble Macbeth" to becoming a "butcher", a cold-blooded murderer. On the other hand, *Maqbool*'s conflicts appear less intense; though he

recognizes the loyalty he owes to Abbaji, who has brought him up like a son, and is torn between his love for Nimmi and his allegiance to the don, the film does not articulate sufficiently the feelings of guilt and indecision.

The filmmaker could have communicated the process of thought through a voiceover, or an aside. Instead, what we get in the film is a character who, after a few protestations, lacks the complexity to carry the moral force of the Shakespearian tragedy. *Maqbool* is a man who is a part of the violent ethos of the mafia at the start of the film, and becomes an even more actively ruthless one at the end. Where is the fall of a ‘good’ man that gives us the myriad feelings of hope, despair and fear that are ours at the end of a Shakespearian play? Bhardwaj’s attempts to bring in, at the end of the film, moral anxieties felt by Nimmi (her mental breakdown, her question, “Is everything we have done a sin?”), as well as Maqbool’s joy in seeing his child, the close-up of a dying Maqbool looking at the sky with sadness) are all calculated to evoke the desired feelings of sympathy in the viewer, but these are not sufficient to allow us to forget the violent milieu from which they have sprung. Moreover, Bhardwaj’s glamorization of violence — with his inclusion of actors like Tabu, the creation of a familial atmosphere at Abbaji’s home that draws the viewer into the deceptive warmth of the mafia family — seems to dilute the moral power of the play.

In the final analysis, I would like to question the word “adaptation” when applied to *Maqbool*. If, as I have attempted to show, the film works from a completely different moral foundation to the Shakespearian play, is it correct to call it an adaptation? There are certain commonalities of plot, character and motif, it is true; but, as Niti Sampat-Patel says, “a film text that is the product of adaptation cannot stand autonomously, and must be read in terms of its source” (*Beam*, Jan.2000, Vol.20, p.10). *Maqbool* stands on its own as a well-made film about the underworld, but I would hesitate to call it an ‘adaptation’ of Shakespeare’s play.

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