

Interrogating Gendered Identity in *Macbeth* and *Maqbool*: Reproduction or Recreation?

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Abstract

The present paper seeks to explore the issues of gender politics inherent in Shakespeare's tragic masterpiece, *Macbeth*, and Vishal Bhardwaj's adaptation of *Macbeth* in Bollywood movie, *Maqbool*. The paper also tries to find out whether Vishal Bhardwaj has simply reproduced the gender discrimination present in Shakespeare's time or tried to retextualise the play in Indian context with a different perspective. It is also shown in the paper how Bhardwaj incorporates some elements from Kurosawa's adaptation of *Macbeth*, *Throne of Blood* in his representation of the main female character. The questions of subalternized femininity and transgressive sexuality, pivotal in the making of the events are laid open in the paper.

Keywords: Adaptation; Subalternized femininity; Transgression; Subversion.

If Shakespeare's works are the epitome of English literature, Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* is the epitome of cinema based on adaptation. It is arguably the best adaptation of a

Shakespearean play ever; it retains and also heightens the essence of the original through some innovative devices. With *Maqbool*, Bhardwaj (who also co-wrote the screenplay and composed the film's music) has put a distinctly Indian spin on *Macbeth*, adapting it to both a new culture and a new age. It is an Indian variety of Shakespeare's masterpiece with a different temporal and spatial setting. There have been many stage presentations and screen versions of this play around the world. However, there had not been any film adaptation in Indian context before this one. *Maqbool* is a path setter in many ways.

Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* has sufficient scholarly inputs for those who are interested in transculturated Shakespeare. The ingenuity and thoroughness with which Bhardwaj and his scriptwriter Abbas Tyrewala relocate Shakespeare's play to an entirely new socio-cultural setting is without parallel among Shakespeare films.

Poonam Trivedi dubs it as a "cross-over" film — a hybrid entity that is imbricated in its postcolonial condition (2007, 153). The ease with which transformation of the post-Elizabethan era to the underworld of Mumbai is conducted leaves one awe-inspired. It is impossible for a filmmaker making films in Hindi to escape from the hegemony of Bollywood itself. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha has observed,

While Bollywood exists for, and prominently caters to, a diasporic audience of Indians, and sometimes (as, for example, with Bhangra-rap) exports into India, the Indian cinema — much as it would wish to tap this "non-resident" audience — is only occasionally successful in doing so, and is in almost every instance able to do so only when it, so to say, Bollywoodizes itself . . . (29; italics in original)

Shakespeare adaptations in India proliferated, largely from concerted efforts to introduce English education into the colony (Chakravarti 41). Early indigenous productions of Shakespeare's plays moved from free borrowings of plots to more "critical appropriations which countered colonial hegemony" (Trivedi 2005, 47). It would be wrong, however, to assume a monolithic Indian tradition of Shakespeare adaptations. Different regions came up with their own distinct productions, often incorporating pre-existing local performance practices. The influence of these indigenous theaters on screen adaptations of Shakespeare cannot be discounted. As Rajiva Verma points out, the Bombay film industry (Bollywood) turned to adaptations popularized by the Parsi theater while producing its own versions of Shakespeare (2005, 270). Verma goes on to speculate that the Parsi theater not only provided screenplays for films such as the 1927 production of *Dil Farosh (Merchant of Venice)*, but also inspired the highly inflated rhetorical style that came to mark Bollywood Shakespeare productions. From the onset, most screen adaptations, much like the play scripts, transposed Shakespearean plots into Indian contexts and included the now indispensable song and dance sequences. Even more "authentic" productions, such as Nargis Art Concern's *Romeo and Juliet (1947)*, modeled on MGM's 1936 version of *Romeo and Juliet*, retained the song sequences (Verma 2005, 271). Significantly, while *Macbeth* enjoyed a strong presence on the Indian stage (second only to *Othello*), the play remained largely ignored by the Bollywood film industry prior to *Maqbool* (Trivedi 2005, 48).

The popularity of "writing back" theories (Ashcroft et al., 2002) in postcolonial discourse makes it tempting to think of *Maqbool* as a response to a legacy of colonization and enforced bardolatry. Poonam Trivedi writes that with Shakespeare, as with cricket, Indian cinema has "appropriated another imperial icon" and done it well (2007, 157). This is true, but does not take into account the fact that Bharadwaj came to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* not through a colonial canon or global imperialism, but through Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa. In an interview, Bharadwaj explains:

A very dear friend had given me Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* to watch. That was when I got a glimpse of the power of Shakespeare's writing (and Kurosawa's cinematic interpretation, equally powerfully). Later I went deeper into the story of *Macbeth* with my underworld

framework in mind and was absolutely charmed by what the *Macbeth* metaphor could do in terms of power and depth to the story. . . (2003, 47)

Maqbool takes its emotional content of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* moving the characters to Mumbai's underworld. Hence witches become two corrupt cops who make prophecies, which come out true. This recasting of the witches as a pair of conniving cops is the most original of the transpositions in the adaptation (there have been dozens of adaptations of *Macbeth* to gangland situations, but the witches have never before been visualized as policemen). It not only naturalizes and makes believable the unnatural and the supernatural, but also breaks the supernatural down into a gamut of recognizable relations and inferences. And this comprises the larger achievement of *Maqbool*: providing a sharp, fresh take on *Macbeth* that continually surprises, not only through its acute social localization, oblique political comment, and its intertextual relations with other Bollywood films, but also through its cinematic "re-textualization" of Shakespeare's imagery.

Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* adapts Shakespeare's medieval Scotland to feudal Japan during the Sengoku period (1477-1573), which was "marked by internecine wars among rival clans . . . [when] warlords violently seized domains . . . and were killed in turn by their vassals" (Price 2003). Relocated in time, space, and culture, *Throne of Blood* follows the main characters and plot lines of *Macbeth*, with significant additions, including *noh* performance styles — a choice that at first baffled critics, but later was hailed as an ingenious reworking of one cultural history into another.

Abbaji (Pankaj Kapur) in *Maqbool* is a don of Indian underworld. He rules the atmosphere around him in his unique style. Lady Macbeth becomes Nimmi (Tabu), Abbaji's mistress, who has a strong passion for Abbaji's most trusted deputy, Maqbool (Irfan Khan). This is not Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth- she is equally fierce, but given a softer and more shadowy countenance. She is not an ideology bearer. She doesn't suppress her desires. She sufficiently increases her wicked and manipulative nature. Maqbool (Khan) is seduced by Abbaji's mistress Nimmi, who feeds him wonderfully arch dialogue like "There are 13 moles on my body. Do you want to see them all?"

The contrast is sharply drawn between *Macbeth* and *Maqbool*. *Macbeth* is driven by his love for the throne. *Maqbool* is driven by his love for Nimmi. *Maqbool's* reverence for his godfather, Abbaji crumbles as he's drawn like a moth to fire to Nimmi who is indeed the conniving mistress and a vulnerable lover. She repeatedly hints at the death of Abbaji to Maqbool, and also warns Maqbool of the relationship between Sameera, Abbaji's daughter, and Guddu who is the son of Maqbool's best friend, Kaka, "*kyonki agar beta na ho, to damaad hi waaris hota hai*". Eventually, Nimmi is able to convince Maqbool to murder Abbaji, and crown himself the new leader of the gang.

Maqbool and *Macbeth* are narratives of people who depend on bloodshed and violence for their living; who, to consolidate their positions, are sucked into treachery and revenge; and who end up eliminating each other. *Maqbool* positions women in a seductive,

but ultimately destructive role, and though it valorizes violence as a livelihood, it ends by asserting the moral that violence does not pay.

A loud, raucous chatter of crows and other birds, for instance, visualizes Lady Macbeth's statement that "[t]he raven himself is hoarse / That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan / Under my battlements" (1.5.38-40) and forms the background "music" to *Maqbool* and Nimmi's first long scene by the roadside, where she plants the seeds of treachery in his mind. The cawing of crows, in fact, becomes a choric comment on all talk of murder: it accompanies the new ACP Devasare's questioning of the Inspector duo on his first day; it forms the background to Abbaji's questioning of the dead Moghul's son Boti (Macduff); and it chimes with Nimmi's aggressive stroking of the fires of ambition and eroticism in *Maqbool*.

This representation is what Bhardwaj directly reproduces from *Macbeth*. Nimmi is shown as a violent, voluptuous, and seductive woman. Like Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's play she is able to convince the hero to murder the boss/ruler and usurp the latter's place. Look how violent she could be in the murder scene.

But unlike in the case of Lady Macbeth, ambition alone does not drive Nimmi. Abbaji's mistress shares much in common with the fallen women who emerge as love interests of rising gang lords in films such as *Dayavan* (1988) or *Vaastav* (1999). Of course, Nimmi — unlike the female leads of these popular gangster films — is not a common prostitute, though she undoubtedly shares their desperation and marginalization. At the engagement, amidst laughter and merriment, Guddu and Sameera feed each other. Abbaji's newest heart-throb, a Bollywood starlet, proceeds flirtatiously to offer him food. Abbaji makes clear his preference for the newcomer, signaling an imminent switch in mistresses. Nimmi, abandoned and forgotten, watches the couple from the sidelines. Yet for Nimmi, murdering Abbaji amounts to more than mere ambition or revenge. Instead, it translates into survival, a shot at a life with the man she loves — *Maqbool*. While Nimmi had resorted to insinuations earlier, she now explicitly goads *Maqbool* to murder. Wearing the sacrificial garland reserved for slaughtered goats, she exclaims:

Nimmi: It's time you sacrificed me, too. Jahangir has got a new mistress. How can I face going home? Everyone knows I'm Jahangir's mistress. He looks disgusting with his clothes off. Must be my father's age.

Maqbool: And he is my father. I've been brought up in this house.

Nimmi persists in her pleas for the murder. She informs *Maqbool* that he has to choose between two deaths — Abbaji's or her own. The murder therefore is triggered by ambition as well as love. The way Nimmi has been presented in the movie seems to generate from a strong misogynistic bias present in all ages.

Shakespeare presents *Macbeth* as a powerful political statement negating female authority and warning all against the disaster emanating from a woman in power. As concern about the sovereign's gender formed one of the primary social considerations of Shakespeare's day, one might expect to see these gender considerations revealed in Shakespeare's writing. In *Macbeth* as well as in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare implicitly suggests the

danger of women's involvement in politics at the sovereign level. Shakespeare reflects political gender anxieties. He develops a schema of conflict and chaos erupting from such anxiety, and in the plays' contextual resolutions, he fulfills the desire for a return to state stability through a solidification of the patriarchal system. *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* do not make an explicit political argument regarding Elizabeth's monarchy, but in these plays Shakespeare does invoke the tensions of the day as related to female leadership.

Leonard Tennenhouse, author of *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres*, professes that Shakespeare was distinctly a Renaissance individual and playwright, and his writing cannot be divorced from this perspective. John Wain, in *The Living World of Shakespeare*, finds that "Shakespeare is from first to last an intensely political writer. He knows that the happiness of the common man is very much bound up with the question of who has power at the top." The English scene, viewed from an Elizabethan standpoint, was dominated by one urgent need: the need for political stability, guaranteed by an undisputed monarchy. The instability of the Tudor monarchy, plagued with the problems of Henry's succession, the failed marriage of Mary, and the ambivalence of Elizabeth's feelings toward matrimony, had created a desire within the culture for a stable monarch. Female rule lacked stability and thus contained an inherent danger. At a core gender relations level, the question was raised whether a woman was fit to represent the great English nation? Or did the inferiority of her gender debase the state itself? Many Elizabethan English grappled with these questions, and among them was Shakespeare's own. Ultimately, the anxieties produced by these concerns led the culture to yearn for the stability represented by a king, not a queen.

In the play *Lady Macbeth's* actions lead to political instability, and a disruption of natural harmony occurs because of their involvement in the political processes. When Lady Macbeth desires to be "unsexed," her words reveal the assumed discordance between feminine nature and political ambition. By putting these desires in masculine—or gender-neutral—form, Lady Macbeth explicitly suggests their unnaturalness. Shakespeare's language here induces tension and reflects the political gender tensions already existent in the Elizabethan world. While Lady Macbeth wishes to be "unsexed," Elizabeth asserted the title King as frequently as Queen and sought to establish her own power by transcending the gender issue.

Just as Elizabeth had difficulty asserting political authority as a woman, and thus adopted male gender characteristics, Shakespeare de-feminizes Lady Macbeth to give her ambitions credibility. Such unnatural positioning created tension in the play and reflected anxiety in the Elizabethan world. Shakespeare simply literalizes the homology which makes unruliness on the part of an aristocratic woman into an assault on the sovereign's power. He allows Lady Macbeth to overrule her husband in order to show that such inversion of sexual relations is also an inversion of the political order. Her possession of illicit desire in its most masculine form—the twisted ambition of the malcontent—leads directly to regicide. The

Elizabethan world might have accepted the non-traditional rule of the female monarch but the anticipated outcome was always the return to political stability in the form of a male monarch.

Shakespeare, thus, seems to advocate a return to unquestionably patriarchal systems to restore harmony. Shakespeare's resolutions do not suggest positive involvement of women within the political structure. One sees potential conflicts arising from female ambition for sovereign power and corruption of the politic body through corruption of the female sovereign body. This return to patriarchy represents both Shakespeare's political resolution and the Elizabethan cultural desire. And here Shakespeare as well as the Elizabethan world subalternized women.

Macbeth, being a product of a male writer in a patriarchal set up definitely projects women as the inferior beings to be subjugated, subordinated and subalternized and herein lies the power game inherent in all ages in man-woman relationship.

Gender role reversal that we come across in the play is a direct reference to the general underestimation of women in the play and in all times as well. There is a hint of gender role reversal in the very opening scene of the play as the witches utter: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair", the 'fair' being the woman and the 'foul' being man. Paradoxical though it is, the authority and the power that are attributed to Lady Macbeth and the witches are the very causes of their being treated as subalterns by Shakespeare. Lady Macbeth is at the helm of affairs as she exercises full control over Macbeth and guides him through his psychological turmoil to the killing of Duncan. Shakespeare pushes Lady Macbeth to invoke all evil minstrels to "unsex" her.

Come you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here;

And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full

Of direst cruelty! (*Macbeth*, I.v. 40-43)

Lady Macbeth "unsexes" her, imbibes manly strength, shuns all feminine "infirmities", and only then can have control upon Macbeth. She sheds herself of femaleness and is ready to kill the naked new-born babe. Shakespeare strips Lady Macbeth of her womanhood, her real entity, and gratifies the male taste of the Elizabethan audience.

I have given suck; and know

How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:

I would, while it was smiling in my face,

Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,

And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn, as you

Have done this. (I.vii. 49-54)

She has her masculine indifference to blood and death,

Come to my woman's breasts,

And take my milk for gall, ye murd'ring ministers,

* * *

That no compunctious visitings of nature

Shake my fell purpose... (I.vii. 54-59)

She chastises her husband for behaving not like a “man” and herself takes control of the entire situation like a “man”. She is well aware of the infirmities in the very character of her husband and thus guides him all through. She provokes him:

Art thou afar'd

To be the same in thine own acts and valour,

As thou art in desire? Would'st thou have that

Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life... (I.vii. 39-42)

It is the sense of intellectual energy and strength of will overpowering her feminine nature which draws from her husband that burst of intense admiration--

Bring forth men-children only!

For thy undaunted metal should compose

Nothing but males. (I.vii. 73-75)

The point here is that Lady Macbeth as a woman is never given due weightage. Only when she strips herself of womanhood and imbibes manliness she becomes the instrumental factor in the course of the dramatic action. The character is made powerless, a pitiful creature when her essential womanhood comes out, when she does not have any need to “unsex” herself. In fact, throughout the play she shows her pseudo-manliness only. Deep at heart she remains a woman. Thus, she “knows” how “tender 'tis to love the babe that milks” her. She fails to kill Duncan because he resembles her father. All these are essentially feminine attributes in her character. Her strength deteriorates, she falls into periods of lunacy and sleepwalking, she is reduced to an ordinary psychiatric patient because she has been forced by the playwright to shun her individual identity and mask herself with masculinity.. As a woman she is timid, infirm, powerless, and marginalized. In the Sleep-walking scene she is so helpless and here her inherent feminine weakness comes out. She went against her natural self, “unsexed” herself to gratify the masculine interests of the people, but in the end her essential womanhood comes out. The utterance – “All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” – is the cry of a wretched soul. Let’s see how Vishal Bhardwaj and Akira Kurosawa present their characters. . .

Bhardwaj incorporates elements from Kurosawa’s adaptation of *Macbeth*, *Throne of Blood*, in portraying the heroine as a pregnant woman, something absent in the source text. Rather, all through Shakespeare’s text the infertility of the lady is hinted at.

Freud claimed that in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Macbeth is not grossly concerned about his personal political ambition; Macbeth is perhaps primarily preoccupied with his future

dynasty. "Macbeth is incensed by this decree of destiny," Freud writes. "He is not content with the satisfaction of his own ambition, he desires to found a dynasty and not to have murdered for the benefit of strangers" (Freud 1991, 32). Freud's proposition that Macbeth acts mainly, but not exclusively, out of concern for his future dynasty is present in Shakespeare's play, albeit in rudimentary and marginal form. But in *Maqbool*, Vishal Bhardwaj's unusually perceptive and seminal retextualization of Macbeth, an emphasis on Macbeth's future dynasty is conspicuously developed and reinforced. Poonam Trivedi claims that the film is a "retextualization" because it not only augments Shakespeare's play by reimagining critical scenes, but also because the film, though admittedly still an appropriation, sufficiently mimics or contains much of the mythos, character, and imagery of Shakespeare's play: "For what is strikingly significant about the film is how much of the original text is retained, and engaged with, within the adaptation, in terms of the plot, character, imagery and not just theme and atmosphere" (Trivedi 2007, 153). She points out that the film's retextualization comments on a "festering urban culture"; that the film too aligns itself with postmodernist, self-conscious filmic practice by alluding to the realities of Bollywood cinema and its ostensible nexus to the Mumbai criminal underworld.

In showing Nimmi as pregnant and later giving birth to a child untimely ripped from her womb Bhardwaj insists upon the role of a woman mainly as a procreator and thus helping her man in perpetuating his image or authority. In fact, the question of succession is so crucial in Bhardwaj's movie. It is the central issue that leads the action to the end. And herein lies another shrewd game of gender politics. As Socrates and Plato took women simply as procreators so the filmmaker does in Bhardwaj. Immediately before his death Maqbool finds his offspring safe in the hands of Sameera and Guddu. He is so happy at the moment that he lets his weapon drop from his hand and becomes oblivious of the purpose for which he has come over to the hospital. He is so carefree that he becomes unmindful of the threat before him. The question of procreation and perpetuation thus become central in the final understanding of the production and here is the subjugation of womanhood. A woman is a sex-object first and then the procreator. Let's see those moments in the movie.

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