

## Trans-creating the Bard in Alien Soil: A Critical Look at Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool*

- N D Dani

**Abstract:** This paper proposes to critically assess the 'achievement' of the Indian filmmaker Vishal Bhardwaj's trans-creation of 'Macbeth' in Hindi. The Hindi trans-creation titled *Maqbool* has no doubt received both praise and reservations at the hands of film critics and reviewers.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Vishal Bhardwaj, *Maqbool*

Shakespeare's plays have always fascinated filmmakers and television producers who have tried to transfer his memorable creations from the medium of the stage to the medium of the film and the small screen. According to one estimate four hundred plus screen and television incarnations of the Bard have been attempted and while most of them are straight transfers from the stage to the other medium, a good number of them are adaptations varying in the degree of alterations that have been introduced in the adapted versions. Let it be said that the straight transfers are certainly a challenge to the director and actors as the wide gap between the medium of the stage and the medium of the film and television confer both advantages and disadvantages. According to film folklore (film folklore/gossip runs the risk of being apocryphal, hence should be taken with a pinch of salt) Lawrence Olivier, whose masterly creations of Shakespeare's tragic heroes are well known, simply laughed at the idea of transferring the Bard to the silver screen when the idea was first shared with him. That he succeeded so well bespeaks of his histrionic capacity to understand and take up the challenge and deliver. The paper will quickly look apart from *Maqbool*, the film under study, at two other film versions of *Macbeth*, the one being 'Orson Welles' *Macbeth* in English and the other being Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa's 'Throne of Blood' made in Japanese, but available with English sub-titles. The purpose of considering, albeit quickly, these two films is to compare the extent of the liberties that a Western filmmaker and an Asian/ non-western filmmaker take while transferring the Bard from the stage to the cinematic medium. These liberties may range over the whole gamut of the dramatic elements from setting to dialogue or may be restricted to a few select elements and are guided by the thematic visions that the filmmaker is able to bring onto the original play of Shakespeare. Orson Welles wanted to draw attention to the element of violence in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and that's why his film on the play introduced certain changes in the original. A quick look can be taken at these changes. Incidents of violence reported in the original play are shown on the screen. The body of the traitor is shown hanging from a horizontal bar and Welles' camera focuses upon this element in the scene concerned. The execution of another traitor, namely, Thane of Cawdor, is performed with maximum ruthlessness in a scene before building up a sense of

accumulating horror by the beating of a drum which stops with the traitor's execution. The mode of death of Lady Macbeth also undergoes a change in the film. Unlike the original play in which her death is merely reported, in the film Lady Macbeth, tortured by her guilt, is shown deliberately jumping from the battlements to her death with a horrible shriek. However, Welles retains the original dialogues – though clipped in a few scenes – and the overall character of the original play. When we come to Kurosawa's film, a great surprise awaits us. 'Throne of Blood' is not merely a 'redoing' of the Bard's play but a complete transformation. Some stark changes can be quickly noted. The number of witches is reduced to just one; the witch in this film is a spirit of the forest; the original Wasteland is changed to a forest; Washizu and Miki (the Japanese Macbeth and Banquo) lose their way in the fog while returning to their King; setting is changed to medieval, feudal, Japan. The ending of the filmed version is far from the reassuring ending of Shakespeare's play as hints of chaos loom large after the killing of Washiju. Apart from these changes the two important changes that Kurosawa makes are in the language of the dialogues (in this case the language is Japanese) and the introduction of elements from the native Japanese dramatic tradition of 'Noh' drama. The use of a 'mask' like expression on Aasaji's face (Kurosawa's Lady Macbeth) and the introduction of flute music are straight from the 'Noh' dramatic tradition of Japan. What Kurosawa is doing in 'Throne of Blood' is creating a version of the British play in the 'Empire Writes Back' mode. While Kurosawa's film does show the 'universality' of the Bard, his 'liberties' with the original show an audacity of imagination and vision that a non-western filmmaker recreating Shakespeare is capable of showing. No doubt, 'Throne of Blood' is held in high esteem for its boldness and refusal to be a slavish imitator of Shakespeare. There are people who question the concept of 'liberties' taken with Shakespeare's plays as if there was something 'sacrosanct' about him; they ought to be reminded that even Shakespeare borrowed the material for his plays and 're-formed' it in his own imagination. It is only pertinent to quote Bertolt Brecht at this stage: "The reason why classic plays should have survived is that people have been exploiting them or even abusing them....The exploitation of it (sic) has secured classic drama a foothold, as only what stimulates people may endure." (qtd in Suddhasheel Sen) One would like to assert by way of illustrating the thesis of Brecht that it is the transposing of a classic playwright like Shakespeare in settings as far removed from the original setting as the medieval, feudal Japan and the underworld Mumbai that shows the resilience of the mettle of which Shakespeare is made. In both cases (in *Throne of Blood* and *Maqbool*) the eternal themes of ambition, betrayal and self-torture are amply illustrated with a different cast of characters acting out their desires and destructions in an entirely different setting and speaking different languages and dialogues.

There has been a long tradition of adapting Shakespeare to the silver screen in the Bombay Hindi cinema; a few attempts in the regional cinema were also made. Among the Hindi film directors adapting the Bard to cinema, the names of Sohrab Modi, who himself played Hamlet

in his film *Khoon ka Khoon* (1935) and of Gulzar, the creator of *Angoor* (1981) based on 'Comedy of Errors', deserve special mention. Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* stands in this long tradition of indigenizing Shakespeare and is a sustained and serious effort to recreate the play in an entirely different setting. Although according to one estimate some two score stage and screen adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in Hindi and regional languages have been attempted, 'Macbeth' has not been a favourite of the film producers/ directors. When *Maqbool* was released it attracted wide critical notice although it was not a box-office hit which is understandable. The cinematic tastes of the common cine-goer to the Hindi film theatres have been so badly debased that the mass audience of the mainstream Hindi cinema cannot appreciate anything on the silver screen that is different from the usual fare doled out by Bollywood. Needless to say this fare is a mix – only the proportion of these elements varies from film to film – of song, dance, fantasy, loud acting, spectacle, catchy dialogue and of course stunts and acres of naked female skin. Although the maker of *Maqbool* could not resist the temptation of including some elements from the mainstream masala movie tradition, his film derives its strength from the creative effort to locate Shakespeare's characters and themes in the underworld setting of 21<sup>st</sup> century Mumbai. If one has to 'slot' the film *Maqbool*, one would place it in the *EmpireWrites Back* category. When Salman Rushdie first used this expression what he wanted to communicate was that the erstwhile British colonies were now confident enough to move out of the shadows of the cultural influence of the Imperial power and the cultural hegemony that this influence exercised over the minds of the writers in the colonized countries. This is the so-called post-colonial moment in which the post-colonial writer could shake off the colonial cultural shackles and proceed forward with cultural subversion. It won't be out of place here to quote the writers of the famed book *The EmpireWrites Back* at some length: "Why should post-colonial societies continue to engage with the imperial experience? Since all the post-colonial societies we discuss have achieved political independence, why is the issue of colonialism relevant at all? This question of why the empire needs to write back to a centre once the imperial structure has been dismantled in political terms is an important one. Britain, like the other dominant colonial powers of the nineteenth century, has been relegated to a comparatively minor place in international affairs....Nevertheless, through the literary canon, the body of British texts which all too frequently still act as a touchstone of taste and value...the weight of antiquity continues to dominate cultural production in much of the post-colonial world. This cultural hegemony has been maintained through canonical assumptions about literary activity...."(Ashcroft Bill et al: p6-7)What has this long quote from Ashcroft Bill and his two co-authors to do with our assessment of *Maqbool*? Precisely this. The book *The EmpireWrites Back* considers the question of 'subversion' in post-colonial cultural formations with regard to precisely one cultural activity, namely, creative writing in English. But literary activity is just one form which cultural aspirations of a country or countries or race (s) take. It is not the only form. Theatre and cinema are

valid and potent forms through which cultural aspirations of people find powerful expression. Additionally, with the introduction of Film Studies in the Indian universities, cinema has come to be recognized as a potentially significant cultural formation deserving of serious 'reading' and evaluation and no less worthy than a poem or a play. It is in this context that the observations quoted above are to be considered vis-à-vis cinema produced in India. *Maqbool* is illustrative of the intellectual and cultural confidence that a post-colonial society can display in taking a canonical play from no less a writer than the redoubtable William Shakespeare and re-create it in a language which till the other day stood relegated to the 'periphery' and transfer its dramatic elements into another idiom, another setting, another cast of characters etc. It is in this way that *Maqbool* can be described as a truly post-colonial work of art that attempts to write back to the empire. An important point to remember here is that *Maqbool* does not use a faithful Hindi translation of the Shakespearean dialogue from 'Macbeth'; it uses the Hindi language but 're-creates' its own dialogue which suits the social 'milieu' the characters in the film inhabit. According to Ashcroft Bill and his co-authors two important strategies that the post-colonial creative/ literary writers employ as devices of 'subversion' are 'abrogation' and 'appropriation'. I think we can do with a small quote from the book *The Empire Write Back* once again: "Abrogation is a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic...but without the process of appropriation the moment of abrogation may not extend beyond a reversal of the assumptions of privilege....Appropriation is the process by which the language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience....in one sense all post-colonial literatures (read theatre and cinema, too) are cross-cultural because they negotiate a gap between 'worlds', a gap which the simultaneous processes of abrogation and appropriation continually strive to define and determine their practice." (Bill Ashcroft et al: p 38) One can safely and usefully apply the concepts of 'abrogation' and 'appropriation' to 'read' *Maqbool* as a post-colonial film. Also, *Maqbool* can be safely described as a 'cross-over' film in which Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural 'hybridity' in postcolonial artistic creations is successfully evidenced. The film successfully weds the alien form of the Shakespearean tragedy to native content.

One can do with a quick summary of the plot of Vishal Bhardwaj's film before proceeding with further discussion of this film. *Maqbool* is the story of the rise and fall of Maqbool Mian (Irfan Khan) against the backdrop of the Muslim Mumbai underworld which is into smuggling, financing politicians and Bollywood and which is so powerful that it can get an honest but pesky police officer transferred quickly. The particular set-up portrayed in the film is ruled over by a ruthless patriarch affectionately called Abbaji by his household members. Jehangir alias Abbaji (PankajKapoor) is a gang lord who runs his 'business' with the help of his two trusted men- his right hand man Maqbool and Kaka – and sleeps with his mistress Nimmi (played by Tabboo) young enough to be his daughter. It is Nimmi who further insinuates the budding seed of ambition in Maqbool's mind – the initial insinuation comes from the police cop Pandit (the Bhardwaj version of the Witches) who dabbles in astrology

and predicts that Maqbool will soon replace Jehangir – to make her future secure, as Jehangir's glad eye is now resting on another young would-be-mistress and also because she is sexually attracted towards Maqbool. Initially, Maqbool, like Macbeth, is reluctant to kill his mentor; he finally gives in due to Nimmi's irresistible sexual charm and Pandit's prophesy. Like the original play, in 'Maqbool' the protagonist too suffers pangs of hallucinatory guilt both at the killing of Jehangir/Duncan and later Kaka/Banquo. Nimmi, like Lady Macbeth, goes mad trying to remove the blood stains that had splashed on to her body when Maqbool killed Abbaji in their bed. Maqbool, like Macbeth, is undone when his political master refuses to protect him against the police and the naval officers give him a hot chase (the sea comes to the doorstep of Maqbool as predicted by the cop Pandit). Finally, Maqbool is killed by the bullet of Guddu/Macduff, husband to Sameera, Jehangir's daughter.

It is as a postcolonial re-creation of the canonical bard that the film *Maqbool* makes highly profitable reading. To begin with, Bhardwaj borrows the overall structure of Shakespearean tragedy as the story of a character, basically good but suffering from a personality trait (hamartia) that proves to be the source of his undoing. When a Shakespearean tragic play opens the protagonist is at a time of high noon in life but is led to commit some act (s) which takes him downhill on the road of his career until he loses both his position of eminence and his inner piece, finally going down and meeting with his death. Shakespeare complicated this theory of tragedy in 'Macbeth' when he decided to make Macbeth the principal character of his eponymous play. For Macbeth is unlike his other tragic characters in that, in the progress of the play, he switches from a 'hero' to a 'villain' after he assassinates, like a coward, (he kills Duncan in sleep at his residence Inverness) his good and above board King Duncan who had put so much faith in his bravest general. Vishal Bhardwaj didn't acknowledge his debt to Shakespeare in 'Maqbool' (he did this in case of another Shakespeare adaptation called 'Omkara') probably for fear of being marginalized by the masses as the reference to Shakespeare might have put them off and he is known to have asserted that his *Maqbool* was not "textbookish" Shakespeare and was not meant for the Shakespearean scholars (qtd in Poonam Trivedi: p236). Is it not a piece of irony that scholars today are discussing Bhardwaj's film vis-à-vis his source and giving him credit for not making a textbookish adaptation of the Bard's original play? Besides retaining the overall structure of the Shakespearean tragedy, Bhardwaj retains the characters—albeit in their Mumbai underworld incarnations—of the play 'Macbeth'. But it is in the 'alterations' that the success or otherwise of Bhardwaj lies. Bhardwaj is on record as having been inspired to re-create the Shakespearean play into a Hindi film inhabiting a different and indigenous format after watching Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*. The two well-known devices of abrogation and appropriation can be seen in action in *Maqbool* and our task should now be to assess as to what extent the filmmaker has been successful in employing these postcolonial/ Empire-Writes-Back strategies. A list of the abrogations/appropriations (the two function simultaneously) employed in *Maqbool* can be quickly prepared:

1. The Witches of Shakespeare have changed into two corrupt, bumbling cops (Pandit&Purohit) who sow the seeds of 'ambition' in *Maqbool's* mind. This 'new' interpretation of the Shakespearean Witches is a stroke of genius in *Maqbool*.
2. Duncan (Abbaji/Jehangir) here is a Muslim underworld ganglord.
3. Lady Macbeth (Nimmi) is Duncan's young mistress.
4. Birnam Wood is changed into the Bombay sea.
5. Lady Macbeth (Nimmi) gives birth to a child (in 'Throne of Blood' Aasaji/Lady Macbeth gives birth to a dead child)

It is important to mention that *Maqbool* is not to be merely assessed in terms of the abrogations/appropriations employed. What is more important is what purposes are served by them? Apart from asserting the boldness of imagination in fitting the 'milieu' of *Macbeth* onto a local /Indian context, these alterations serve as critiques of the Mumbai underworld-Politician-Corrupt policemen nexus. Bhardwaj is using the Shakespearean play's format to critique facts operating in a local/Mumbai societal set-up thus making a meaningful comment upon the post-Independent realities of big time crime which operates under the shadow of hand-in-glove politicians and corrupt police force which are expected to curb rather than promote this kind of crime. Another purpose served by these alterations is to illustrate the eternal themes of betrayal, and the consequences of living life in the dangerous lane. Among the changes which Bhardwaj's film makes to differently visualize the characters and themes of Shakespeare's 'Macbeth', the following can be noted for their imaginativeness and inventive fecundity.

1. In the characters of Inspector Purohit (Naseeruddin Shah) and Pandit, the police cop-cum-astrologer (Om Puri) we have an example of Bhardwaj's genius. The police copduo combines in their collective characters the roles of the Witches and the Shakespearean Fool. They seem to know more than the actual participants in the gory drama being unfolded on the screen before our eyes and in their Theory of Balancing forces (*Aag ko pani ka dar bana rehna chahiye*) 'know' more than their otherwise buffoon-cum-corrupt behaviour would suggest.
2. The scene in which the guilty mind of Maqbool (Irfan) has hallucinatory vision of the goat's blood on the floor of the courtyard. Maqbool scolds the servant for not wiping out the butchered goat's blood. The blood of the goat is only a hallucination created by the overheated imagination of Maqbool who is unhappy with the conspiracy of assassinating his god-father and mentor Abbaji alias Jehangir. It is an equivalent of the dagger with blood droplets upon its blade in the Dagger Scene in the original play.
3. The recreation of the Banquet scene. The murdered body of Kaka/ Banquo is brought to the haveli while the prayer meeting for the dead Jehangir is in progress. Maqbool hypocritically grieves over his death (fact is he himself engineered Kaka's murder.) The 'dead' Kaka/Banquo opens his one eye and Maqbool shrieks back in horror. The scenes mentioned at points 2 and 3 are further examples of the director's imaginativeness and innovative ingenuity.
4. Another important point about *Maqbool* is the use of the postmodern device of self-referentiality to critique the underworld-Bollywood nexus. Maqbool is appointed by Jehangir as the person in the Jehangir gang who would look after the financing of and other aspects of Bollywood.

All said and done, while *Maqbool* is a significant step towards decolonization of our attitude vis-a-vis the Shakespearean canon, it is the

temptation to give in to the conventions of the mainstream Bollywood cinema that compromises the quality of Vishal Bhardwaj' effort. The following run-of-the-mill elements can be noted:

1. The wedding scene of the nikah of Jehangir's daughter, Sameera, with Guddu, complete with henna-dyed hands of women. The song and dance 'masala' which is such an indispensable part of the mainstream Bollywood movie without which success on the box-office is elusive.
2. The Dargah scene and the qawalli in which Jehangir – a criminal - participates, as an audience, with made-up religious enthusiasm. Nothing emotionally engages the Bollywood mass audience better than a qawwali thrown in a Hindi film.
3. The by-now-compulsive element of Hindu-Muslim communal harmony (so common in Bollywood cinema). Jehangir marries his daughter with his Hindu henchman Kaka's son Guddu who is in love with Sameera.

Among other points that do not sit comfortable with the discerning audience the following is a very important one:

1. The post-murder madness (seemingly born out of guilt) of Nimmi/Lady Macbeth. Nimmi's madness is out of character as presented in the film. There is no justification for it. It is melodramatic. In the original play *Macbeth*, the madness of Lady Macbeth, born out of a sense of guilt and the return of her human abhorrence to blood and murder (remember her invocation to the evil spirits in her speech "Come to my woman's breasts...."), is one of the most powerful scenes in the entire Shakespearean tragic drama. It is the compulsive hand-washing scene ("All the perfumes of Arabia....") and the sleep-walking scene that acquit Lady Macbeth from the often-levelled charge of her being a fourth Witch.

Finding fault in a work of art is too easy. One must appreciate the ability of an Indian filmmaker to re-imagine the Bard in an Indian setting while preserving the essential and eternal theme(s) which the original play dramatically presented in its Scottish setting with its Scottish plot and characters. It won't be wrong to say that in *Maqbool* Bhardwaj has gone beyond the 'adopt' stage which is seen in the creative artists who are writing under the shadow of the Colonial canonical artists. *Maqbool* is a powerful illustration of the second 'adapt' stage that postcolonial creative artists display in their artistic creations. In this stage although they 'borrow' the overall framework of a western genre, they reimagine and retextualize the elements within the conventions of the genre. We shall have to wait for either Bhardwaj himself or some other ambitious filmmaker to give evidence of the third stage in postcolonial artistic creation, namely, the 'adept' stage (Peter Barry: p195).

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