

Adapting Macbeth: Shakespeare to Bollywood

Introduction

“Renowned actor Naseeruddin Shah once stated in an interview that although in Hindi film industry the roots may appear to be missing but every big story is from Shakespeare” (Chaudhary, 2018)

The research paper on English Literature examines the influence of Shakespeare on Indian cinema and takes the specific case study of Vishal Bhardwaj's 'Maqbool' to critically explore how a literary work is adapted and interpreted through film. The essay starts with a brief account of Shakespeare's impact on Indian cinema, then focuses on the case study, and finally evaluates whether the adaptation remains faithful to Shakespeare's artistry

Historical Context

William Shakespeare has had a tremendous impact on Bollywood cinema, one of the world's largest film industries. "Since its earliest days, cinema has been interested in Shakespeare, and cinematic adaptations of his plays have not been limited to the West" (Gnes, 2017, p. 33). In the early twentieth century, Parsi theatre—such as the work of playwright Agha Hashar Kashmiri, known as the Shakespeare of Urdu—greatly influenced Indian cinema, drawing on Shakespeare's style and other dramatic techniques to present Indian themes, characters, and languages. "Agha Hashar Kashmiri's play *Safed Khoon*, which is an Urdu adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, served as the basis for the development of song and dance melodrama in the Parsi theatre, which in turn became a direct influence on the conventions of Hindi cinema" (Abdullah & Shaukat, 2017).

Shakespeare, his plays, and his techniques have had, and continue to have, an impact on Indian cinema. Films popularised Shakespeare and embedded him in the consciousness of the masses without their knowledge. Shakespeare's influence on Hindi cinema resonates in theme, story, characters or dialogue, such as *Romeo and Juliet* in *Bobby* (1973), *Ek Duje Ke Liye* (1981), *Love Story* (1981), *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988), and *Saudagar* (1991)" (Chaudhary, 2018). The paper examines and critiques the film *Maqbool* by Vishal Bhardwaj, a Bollywood music composer, film-maker and singer, who has created a trilogy of tragedies inspired by Shakespeare's plays: *Maqbool* from *Macbeth*, *Omkara* from *Othello*, and *Haider* from *Hamlet*. The paper begins by analysing the case study of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and its adaptation by Bhardwaj in his film *Maqbool*, beginning by outlining the narrative of *Maqbool* and then analysing Bhardwaj's creative process, his

sources of inspiration, and how he recontextualises Shakespeare's dramas within Indian sociological frameworks.

Contextualising Macbeth and Maqbool

Shakespeare lived in the seventeenth century, during the Jacobean era, under the rule of James I of England. The culture shaped by the king was characterised by intense drama and turbulence in the Scottish Highlands, a period marked by intrigue, widespread belief in the supernatural, and persistent superstition (Ahmed, 2014). This environment forms the authentic setting for *Macbeth*. Vishal Bhardwaj reimagines this context in his film *Maqbool* by Indianising the environment. He embeds the story within the dark world of Mumbai's underworld, ruled by criminals and their dons.

Parallel to Macbeth, who is loyal to King Duncan, is Maqbool, portrayed by Irrfan Khan, who remains devoted to the Mumbai underworld don Jahangir Khan—known as "Abba Ji" and played by Pankaj Kapur. Nimmi, played by Tabu, is the adaptation of Lady Macbeth; she is the mistress of Maqbool's boss and seduces Maqbool, driving him to murder her lover and encouraging him to seize power from Abba Ji. The parallels persist throughout the narrative: prophecies, immoral choices and actions, and guilt drive Macbeth to covet power and to murder, compelled by ambition and a sense of destiny intertwined with the supernatural. In a similar vein, Maqbool follows the same trajectory.

A vital ingredient in both Shakespeare's literary epic and Bhardwaj's cinematic adaptation is hallucination. Through elements of hallucination and the psychological pain experienced by both the male and female principal characters, Bhardwaj aims to create a timeless artistic journey. This imaginative transposition preserves the essence of Jacobean dramatic sensibilities whilst making them resonate within the social and cultural fabric of contemporary India.

Conclusion: Literary Parallels and Adaptation

Vishal Bhardwaj's adaptation demonstrates a masterful interpretation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* within an Indian cinematic context. Just as Shakespeare's play opens with an ominous prophecy from the witches in a desolate environment, Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* begins amid storm and rain, with Maqbool stating, "Everything we do, everything that happens, it's all part of a bigger design." Soliloquies, a prominent dramatic tool in Shakespeare's work, are mirrored through Bhardwaj's visual language and narrative structure. For example, Macbeth's inner conflict before and after the murder, as seen in the lines "Is this a dagger which I see before me" (Act 2, Scene 1) and "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?" (Act 2, Scene 2), are echoed in Maqbool's haunted psychological state after Abbaji's murder.

Nimmi, like Lady Macbeth in Act V, Scene 1, is plagued by guilt, unable to escape her conscience, uttering, "nahi sone deta hame, baap ko mara hai na humne" (Sleep is evasive,

for we have killed father). These scenes reveal the same depth of psychological trauma and moral reckoning as the original text.

Critics and scholars argue that Bhardwaj's film should be seen as an appropriation rather than a strict adaptation. "To reconstruct or adapt a film, a director heavily relies on the source text, meticulously examining every word, scene, and character. However, the director is also compelled to diverge from the original text to suit the cinematic medium and accommodate contemporary sensibilities. When a filmmaker adheres too rigidly to these demands, the adaptation can lose its true essence and instead become an appropriation. This is precisely what happened with Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool*. Consequently, after a comprehensive analysis of both the literary and cinematic genres, it becomes evident that the film can be characterised as an appropriation of the source text, rather than a faithful adaptation. While there are numerous instances in the film that draw strong parallels with the text, the disparities are more prominent. Nonetheless, it's crucial to acknowledge that, despite changes in setting, location, language, and plot, the film remains true to Shakespeare's core themes. The notions of crime, fear, and evil, as well as the portrayal of a disrupted natural order, mirror those found in the original text, preserving the Shakespearean spirit." (Ray, 2023)

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