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## Reading Shakespeare without his Language: Vishal Bharadwaj's *Maqbool*

Devapriya Sanyal

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Bharadwaj's *Maqbool* is a sophisticated and indigenised version of the Bard's *Macbeth* set in Mumbai (synonymous with Bollywood). It has much to offer those who are interested in transcultural adaptations and reworkings of Shakespeare's plays. Bharadwaj and his co-scriptwriter Abbas Tyrewalla's ingenious adaptation of the original play makes it one of the unparalleled adaptations of the play comparable to Kurosawa's classic *Throne of Blood*. His adaptation of Shakespeare follows a long tradition of India's engagement with Shakespeare's plays both on the stage and on screen. While *Othello* has remained a favourite of playwrights, *Macbeth* in comparison has received little attention from the thespians. Bharadwaj's attempt is the first serious one to engage with the play in Bollywood. While there are Shakespearean echoes in terms of atmosphere, imagery, plot etc. Bharadwaj skilfully blends in the local and Bollywood conventions to ultimately make it a different social and cultural product.

*Maqbool* is set in the murky and dark Mumbai underworld and as such is a part of the gangland films like *Satya*, *Company*, *Vastaav* to name a few and yet it retains its closeness to Shakespeare because of the director's skilful retextualization of the play and a perceptive reading of the same. It is a dark rendering of ambition, lust, hunger for power, madness, forbidden love and sexuality. The film thus comes to represent a significant power that constructs as well as reflects notions of nation, culture and society.

What becomes important here is understanding the film as Bharadwaj envisioned it and trying to make a study of the innovations he brings to his representation of the Shakespearean text. What stands out is the fact that Bharadwaj displays an excellent understanding of Shakespeare who as Laurence Olivier had stated could very well have written for films if he could have. By adapting Shakespeare onto the silver screen and such a fine tragedy as this Bharadwaj has extended the filmic canon which has resulted in a happy appropriation of the bard by the masses who would otherwise have remained inaccessible to them.

The film begins with two policemen holed up in a police van with a petty gangster, waiting for midnight to strike. As the scene unfolds, amidst the rain, the mist and the darkness two things emerge—the policemen even though a part of the state system that ensures law and order for the ordinary citizen is actually in the pay of Abbaji, a don, and the petty gangster is a part of the rival gang that is responsible for the killing of Abbaji's brother. The corrupt policemen have been assigned the task to extract information about the enemy and thus aid in the elimination of the rival gang. As the three converse, Purohit (played by Nasseruddin Shah) asks of Pandit the astrology touting policeman Om Puri, who is engaged in drawing and studying Mumbai's horoscope who will rule over Mumbai - Abbaji or Mughal (the usual contenders for the throne) but the answer returned is a very unexpected one - Pandit smiles serenely to reveal the name of Maqbool instead as the chosen one.

With this two things happen simultaneously - Bharadwaj is successfully able to set the tone of his film (which will be bloody and violent), establish the fact that his protagonist is the eponymous hero Maqbool, after whom the film is titled and which charts his rise and fall. At the same time it clearly establishes a strong link with the Shakespearean play.

As the narrative unfolds it becomes clear that the two policemen just serve their own ends and are politically shrewd; changing loyalties as and where the balance of power tilts and are as such masters of themselves, aiding and withdrawing their help as and when they deem fit.

The confusion in moral order reverberates throughout the film just as in *Macbeth*-the gangsters seem to be in control of Mumbai rather than the elected representatives of people. The chief minister Bhosle is a close friend and political ally of Abbaji's and in turn enjoys his blessings and support in running the government.

Abbaji comes across as a strongman who has graduated from gold smuggling, contract killing to enjoying political power. But he is a figure far removed from the benevolent Duncan figure in Shakespeare's play. He comes across as vicious and cruel and as Maqbool discovers in his conversation with the disgruntled policeman Purohit, that Abbaji had actually murdered his mentor Lalji bhai to acquire control of the gang. In this, Bharadwaj's train of thought matches with Kurosawa's (*Throne of Blood*, 1957) in perhaps trying to absolve Macbeth/Maqbool/Taketoki Washizu of the crime.

After Maqbool has swiftly exacted revenge in killing the head of the rival gang, Kaka (the Banquo figure in this film) and he retire to a farmhouse to await further orders where they are joined by the two corrupt policemen Pandit and Purohit who cannot help predicting that Maqbool will soon replace Abbaji as the head of the family- 'Venus present in the tenth house of your natal chart is extremely powerful. It is called *rajyog*. You will get anything that you want, even Bollywood. Let alone Bollywood, in six months Abbaji's *gaddi* is going to be yours. King of kings'. Kaka his interest piqued now, asks of them to predict his future. They skirt the question to tell him that his son Guddu (Fleance in this film) has a bright future and is the antidote to Maqbool, which Maqbool doesn't take to very kindly.

Soon after, Abbaji's brother-in-law Asif controlling the gang's interests in Bollywood is revealed to be a traitor as he is discovered to be the one who had set Abbaji's brother up and had him murdered to further his own ambitions. Abbaji kills him and appoints Maqbool in his place. The rest of the prophecy falls in place as it is soon revealed that Abbaji's mistress Nimmi and Maqbool are in love with each other (Pandit had already predicted the same but Maqbool although he doesn't acknowledge it directly knows it to be the truth all the same and which motivates him to believe in Pandit's prophecies and act on them accordingly) and she instigates him to murder the ageing don and take his place, 'I have twelve moles in my body, would you like to see where they are?', she also informs him in the same breath that Abbaji's daughter Sameera (a rather unusual move by the director to replace Duncan's two sons Malcolm and Donalbain by a rather naïve daughter) is in love with Kaka's son Guddu who will now inherit the family fortunes and power. Maqbool in the film is the son figure making his relationship with Abbaji, literally meaning 'father' in Urdu, a rather sacred one. Abbaji is evidently fond of Maqbool, he is seen to smile indulgently at him, looks to him for advice and even listens to him. But this obviously comes to naught as Maqbool is goaded on by the lust for power, insecurity, a thwarting of his ambitions at Guddu's hands if he does indeed become Abbaji's son-in-law and political heir, as well as by the sexual fascination Nimmi holds for him as he murders the father figure, which becomes a rather poignant reworking of the original text.

Bharadwaj's soundtrack faithfully follows the camera, sometimes augmenting it and heightening the scope of the drama as it unfolds. The background score remains foreboding at all times in keeping with the narrative. Maqbool and Nimmi's secret love and desire for each other is played out through the first song '*Ru-Ba-Ru*' as is Guddu and Sameera's love for each other (a typical Bollywood convention) in the film but here Bharadwaj uses it to advance his

narrative, as he does with the second song 'Rone do' to portray another side of Maqbool's which is the lover's, a gentler soul, fun loving and affectionate and not the gun toting murdering soul that he might come across to the audience in the first half of the film.

Nimmi, Maqbool's sweetheart is a rather remarkable reworking of Lady Macbeth. She is a failed actress who is the don's mistress, also in danger of being replaced by another just as Maqbool is by the heir apparent-Abbaji's son-in-law Guddu. The couple comes to a tacit understanding to do away with the aged don at the engagement party held for Sameera and Guddu at Maqbool's house. Amidst the merriment, the starlet Mohini from Bollywood who has even danced a *mujra* at Abbaji's behest for the entertainment of his entourage proceeds to flirt with him and even feeds him with her own hand. While Abbaji makes clear his preference for Mohini, Nimmi now threatened by abandonment tells Maqbool the next morning as they stand on the terrace of the house watching the goats being led away for slaughter to be cooked for the festive Biryani and meat dishes, 'It's about time that you sacrifice me too, Jahangir has found a new mistress. I can't face going back home to Lucknow, they all know I am his mistress... He looks disgusting with his clothes off. He must be my father's age atleast.'

With Nimmi's insinuations now turning into goading Maqbool makes a last desperate attempt at reason, 'he is like my father, I've been brought up in this house like a child.' But Nimmi persists in her pleas and delivers an ultimatum to him-he has to choose between either of their deaths-Jahangir's or hers.

*Maqbool* the film is then as much about Nimmi as it is about Maqbool. It becomes a study of a woman's transgressive and assertive sexuality- a rare sight in Bollywood. Unlike other Bollywood heroines who are too helpless to orchestrate their freedom from the strangleholds of patriarchal norms and mores Nimmi here actually dictates her terms when her authority and identity is under crisis and quite successfully at that. Abbaji's murder does mean a shot at a new life with her lover Maqbool and she is quite willing to see blood spilt for it. Maqbool too seems to be partly influenced by this thought as he executes the murder but not without his share of doubts and hesitation as shots of the past flash by in his mind as he hurries through the rain to Abbaji's bedroom where Nimmi sits waiting for him at the dead of night.

If Maqbool is responsible for firing the shot that extinguishes Abbaji's life, Nimmi is equally responsible for laying the groundwork for the murder. Earlier on in the evening, as Abbaji sits distracted by the starlet Mohini, Nimmi cunningly gets Usman (Abbaji's loyal bodyguard) to drink alcohol and he gets so drunk that it leaves him in a state of stupor. Thus Abbaji now bereft of Usman's protection who as Abbaji informs Mohini pompously had saved him on a number of occasions from murderous attempts made on him by his enemies to eliminate him, in a reversal of sorts now lies as helpless as a newborn (earlier he tells Usman to relax, as it is Maqbool's house and refers to it as being safe as a mother's womb) and without protection in that very house as the very lord of the house makes an attempt at his life.

In an interesting reworking of Macbeth's hallucination of the bloody dagger in Shakespeare's original, here it comes to be replaced by Maqbool's crying out to his aged servant Ahmad to wash away the blood from the morning's slaughtering of goats, only to be told that it had indeed been washed away hours ago. However, just as in *Macbeth* the Lady Macbeth figure enacted by Nimmi here at first has an untroubled conscience. She sits vigilantly beside the sleeping ganglord at night as Maqbool fires at Abbaji. As the single shot kills Abbaji it also smears Nimmi with his blood. She tries to wipe it away, shock writ largely on her face as this will later turn into a gesture associated with her madness as she succumbs to death trying to wash away the blood stains off the wall in the room later in a weakened state. As the rest of the



marriage retinue rush into the bedroom at the commotion, the murdering duo of Nimmi and Maqbool then pin the blame on Abbaji's inebriated bodyguard Usman who is killed by Nimmi earlier in a clever move so as to silence him literally from questioning by the others.

But Maqbool is unable to retain control over his kingdom as it witnesses great political and social upheavals. The mafia lord and his world as well as the political leaders appear to be constantly embroiled in a struggle for survival. With Abbaji's murder Kaka and Guddu distance themselves from Maqbool. But a clever ploy by Maqbool wins back Kaka's trust and he invites Kaka and Guddu as well as their gang members to Abbaji's funeral ceremony. On the way to it, Maqbool has Kaka murdered but Guddu escapes just as Fleance had, in the original play. But now Guddu is estranged forever.

The Banquet scene from Shakespeare is replaced by a meeting at Maqbool's in which both Guddu and Kaka are missing and in which the others express their loyalty to Maqbool. The next morning as everybody gathers at Abbaji's funeral meeting, Kaka's dead body is brought in, Banquo's ghost is replaced by Maqbool hallucinating that Kaka is alive and looking at him. This disturbs him and he very nearly betrays himself. Maqbool's fear of the dead's gaze is largely connected to the fact that Abbaji had died looking at Maqbool while Nimmi his counterpart becomes obsessed with imaginary blood stains. Bharadwaj's competent variants of these scenes from Shakespeare's play only serves to point out the fact that he understood the significance of these in terms of the psychological working out of the play, only that he had to rework them so as to make them seem more realistic and consistent with his particular plot.

An angry Guddu now plots Maqbool's downfall whom he had never trusted and now knows to be his father's murderer too with Bhosle's opponent Palekar, intent on forming a new government with Abbaji safely out of the way. Very soon, Maqbool's key gang members are killed while his political patron Bhosle's government too comes under fire as fifteen of his MLAs go missing only to resurface in the opponent's camp. As his government falls, so does Maqbool. Bereft of political patronage which would have otherwise provided him with political immunity his desperate bid to deal in contraband substances so as to raise money to help Bhosle buy his MLAs back and thus re-form the government fails, and which eventually leads to a raid at his house by Customs officials. In the meantime, Nimmi had given birth to a premature baby-it remains uncertain whose child it actually is-Abbaji's or Maqbool's. With a premature delivery and related stress disorders in which Nimmi keeps hearing screams and voices her body is considerably weakened and she is admitted to the Intensive Care Unit of a nursing home from which Maqbool carries her unconscious form away forcefully, to escape the law which only results in her death. But this sequence is not without its own particular brand of ingenuity-it is a re-enactment also at the same time a reworking of the sleepwalking scene as Nimmi dies of guilt and exhaustion in Maqbool's arms questioning the very thing she had initially so strongly believed in-their love.

Now alone, faced with the possibility of annihilation with the law behind him, Maqbool seeks the help of the two corrupt policemen Pandit and Purohit who are obsessed with balancing cosmic forces a la '*shakti ka santulan bahut zaroori hai sansar mein...aag ke liye paani ka daar bana rahna chahiye*' throughout the film, he plans an escape abroad. But not before taking his heir-his son with him. He almost seems to be obsessed with fatherhood and more specially in extending his line. But as he reaches the nursing home a strange sight greets him-he finds his newborn in Guddu and Sameera's arms who hold him as theirs and rather lovingly too.

Maqbool unsure about his intent at first and later the deed-of murdering Abbaji - he now realises the futility of living a life of violence. He leaves a tear drop on the ward door as a blessing for the son whom he will possibly never see again but whom he knows to be in safe hands now. He drops his gun and disguise - a shawl and walks away only to be met by Boti (the Macduff figure here) outside the nursing home who doesn't take a chance and fires three shots at him avenging the murder of his father as well as son and wife (Maqbool was indeed responsible for all the three killings directly or indirectly).

A tilt upwards from Maqbool's POV at the blue sky (a rare sight in Bharadwaj's film) the shot soon turns to red, followed by a close up of Maqbool's face as he lies on the pavement dying. As his eyes close and a peaceful expression comes over his face, spiritual music is heard in the background. Bharadwaj's framing of these shots echo Shakespeare's line in *Macbeth*, 'the time is free' and so it is for Maqbool as his soul leaves his body for the afterlife never to be haunted by the ghosts of the past, in other words his murder victims-Abbaji, Usman, Kaka and Badi bi who haunted him as he went back to his old house and of times which had perhaps remained frozen forever in his memory as guilty ones.

In keeping with the mood of the film most of the frames are dark, with a majority of the scenes being shot in the interiors. There are very few scenes that are shot on locale or outside. There are hardly any shots of the city of Mumbai and there is the persistent use of a bluish filter that drains the frames of any colour. It is only the engagement scene with its corresponding song and dance sequence that sees the use of a lot of colours. The interior shots come to signify the psyche of the protagonist Maqbool as also the psychological level at which the action unfolds. It is a claustrophobic world, closed in at all sides with no light that Maqbool lives in and inherits. In a larger sense it is also symptomatic of the world it represents. The camera captures the action as it unfolds largely through tracking shots, mostly mid shots and close ups. There are hardly any long shots in the film.

In Bharadwaj's *Maqbool* too not unlike Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971), blame is attached to society rather than to individuals. Both Maqbool and Nimmi are punished for their love and desire for each other that is paradoxically seen as transgressive and that which seemingly violates the law of the underworld and which is swift in terms of exacting its retribution. It is clearly a violent and dark society that Maqbool lives in and comes to rule in time. Bharadwaj's *Maqbool* is an aural departure from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* but not so much visually. By placing Maqbool in gangland Bharadwaj's text seems to be suggesting that Maqbool is not alone in his greed or ambition or even desire to be violent in order to achieve his end. It differs from the other gangster films in that the film does not end on a note of darkness and ruin as is characteristic of the thriller genre and noir cinema represented by other gangster films from the Bollywood stable. It is perhaps a much darker and complex vision of humanity that we witness in Bharadwaj's film.

Harriet Hawkins in a bid to explain the phenomenon of filming Shakespeare across time, space and cultures says that it is partly due to the fact that Shakespeare's narratives lend themselves to popular forms, the stories can be modernized or updated and successfully too if I may add. His plays talk about human nature and some universal truths that are as relevant today as they were during the times in which he wrote.

The new product *Maqbool* or for that matter any filmic appropriation of Shakespeare with its new environment, changed audience tastes from a new medium with its distinct industrial demands and commercial pressures (of box office success), rulings of censorship as well as aesthetic norms makes it a rather viable and exciting one.

*Maqbool* with its depiction of a particular culture and relocation of the Shakespearean text comes to stand for an appropriation, rather than as an adaptation only and forces us to consider it in other generic terms. The gangster film also popularly referred to as the underworld film in Bollywood evolved in the aftermath of off screen controversies surrounding the underworld's financing of films.

By choosing a hero like Irrfan, Bharadwaj makes his intent clear of making "serious cinema" and in this he has chosen to relocate themes such as power, ambition, and evil in the Mumbai underworld. Also by choosing to portray the witches as two astrology touting policemen-something his Indian audience can identify with. In the film, Bharadwaj seems to be questioning the larger questions of fate, destiny and individual choice - themes that were an integral part of Shakespeare's play as well. In *Maqbool* the underworld comes to stand for the chaotic state of the system and the policemen the rot in the system as Bharadwaj saw it. This transformation of the supernatural into corrupt cops, Bharadwaj's invention of a new imagery for his film-that of snakes, usually associated with evil in India as in *Maqbool*'s questioning of the corrupt cops, '*Maqbool ke baamri mein kisne haath dala*' or Guddu's, earlier on in the film, '*tu kitna bhola hai re baba, saap aur saapere re farkh bhi nehi kar paya*' or Nimmi's '*sapola ko doodh maat pila Miya*', as well as the radical reworking of Birnham wood as the sea represented by Customs officers who come to raid *Maqbool*'s castle(read house) was necessary to facilitate Bharadwaj's intent in making a serious and realistic film.

*Maqbool* can be understood as demands of Hindi film or Bollywood conventions as well as generic ones. It would be helpful to see it rather as an interpretation of the originary text. By reading it as an appropriation, an original piece of work juxtaposed with its particular socio-politico cultural world we can better understand the work as it translates itself from one medium to another-from text to film, English to Hindi-Urdu. It is just one more narrative in a new stylistic and cultural mode in a dialogical process with the original text and we can safely say that Bharadwaj has been successfully able to indigenize Shakespeare without abandoning the richness or the complexity of the Shakespearean play. The film can also be read as a mature Post-Colonial, Post Modern writing back to the empire and its poet with its play and constant self referencing to Bollywood.

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**BIO-NOTE**

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