

ADAPTATION AND APPROPRIATION: *MACBETH* INTO *MAQBOOL*

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Abstract

Adaptation is a specific process which involves the transition of one genre to another genre: novels and plays into films or musicals; the dramatization of prose narrative and prose fiction; or it could even be the inverse movement of making drama into prose narrative. This very casting of one genre to another generic mode, can be taken as an act of revision. It even indulges in the exercise of trimming and pruning. But at the same time it can be taken as an amplificatory procedure involving addition, expansion, interpolation, and accretion. Appropriation can be understood as the use of borrowed source into the creation of a wholly new cultural product and sphere.

The writings of William Shakespeare have been one of the perennial sources for adaptation and appropriation. Dramatic adaptations of Shakespearean playtexts started as early as in Restoration period. Other genres like poetry, novels, animations, advertisements, and films have engaged themselves with Shakespeare too. The adaptation of Shakespeare makes him fit for new cultural contexts and different political ideologies. From the earliest days of moving pictures, directors have been obsessed with bringing William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to the screen. Akira Kurosawa's murderous medieval lord went down in the most furious fusillade of arrows ever filmed. Orson Welles played the tragic king among Stonehenge-like ruins. Now it's Bollywood's turn. Vishal Bhardwaj has achieved remarkable popularity and critical success worldwide with his two adaptations of Shakespeare, *Maqbool* (*Macbeth*) and *Omkaara* (*Othello*). Both films are very different from those postcolonial adaptations that tend to "talk back" to Shakespeare; instead, Bhardwaj represents the strain of a transcultural adaptation of Shakespeare whose beginnings lay in the nineteenth-century Parsi theater's first forays into indigenizing Shakespearean plays for local audiences. *Maqbool* contains all the cinematic ingredients which places it in the annals of a few global cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare. Here the director successfully indigenizes *Macbeth* at the level of setting, plot, language, and generic conventions without adulterating the complex issues evoked by Shakespeare's play.

Keywords: Adaptation, Appropriation, *Macbeth*, *Maqbool*, Shakespeare.

Adaptation is a specific process which involves the transition of one genre to another genre: novels and plays into films or musicals; the characterization of prose narrative and prose fiction; or it could even be the inverse movement of making drama into prose narrative. This very casting of one genre to another generic mode can be taken as an act of revision. It even indulges in the exercise of trimming and pruning. But at the same time it can be taken as an amplificatory procedure involving addition, expansion, interpolation, and accretion. Deborah Cartmell argues for three broad categories of adaptations: (i) transposition (ii) commentary (iii) analogue.

Transposition is the act of creating entirely different genre like film with all its aesthetic traditions out of the genre like novel and play. This process more than quite often involves further layers of transpositions; relocating their source text not just generically, but culturally, geographically and temporally. For example Baz Luhrmann's 1996 William Shakespeare's *Romeo + Juliet* beautifully updates Shakespeare's early modern Veronese tragedy to a contemporary North American setting. Instead of using swords he uses handguns while retaining the original text's sense of urban gang feuding. Another powerful example is Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* as a 1930s Hollywood film musical embedding Shakespeare's competition of courtly wit on the eve of the Second World War. The second category commentary comments on the politics either of the source text or the new one, or both usually by means of alteration and addition. Notable examples are Derek Jarman's 1979 film *The Tempest* and Peter Greenaway's Irish epic *Prospero's Books* (1991) which in turn are based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Cartmell's third category is analogue. It may enrich and deepen our understanding of the new cultural product; it may not be entirely feasible to enjoy the work independently. Examples involve Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995), a Valley girl variation of Jane Austen's *Emma*; Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and its recontextualizations of Joseph Conrad's dark 19th century exploration of the colonial enterprise in the Congo, *Heart of Darkness*; and Michael Winterbottom's *The Claim* (2001) in which Thomas Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge is re-envisioned as a subtle variation on the Hollywood genre of the Western, relocating the action to gold-rush America in the 1860s (Adaptations 24).

Appropriation can be understood as the use of borrowed source into the creation of a wholly new cultural product and sphere. This may or may not have any kind of generic shift but juxtaposition of one text against another text is must. A good appropriation encourages the interplay and reciprocal action and reaction between the embedded texts. This interplay emerges as the central aspect of appropriation which produces new meanings, applications, and resonances.

The writings of William Shakespeare have been one of the potential sources for adaptation and appropriation. Dramatic adaptations of Shakespearean playtexts started as early as in Restoration period. Other genres like poetry, novels, animations, advertisements, and films have engaged themselves with Shakespeare too. The Latin etymological root of the word 'adapt', *adaptare* means to make it fit (Fischlin 3). Thus the adaptations of Shakespeare invariably make him fit for new cultural contexts and different political ideologies. It offers us new vantage points to approach Shakespeare in the study of various recent theoretical movements such as feminism, modernism, structuralism, post colonialism, queer discourses, and many others. Interestingly enough Ben Jonson's famous observation that Shakespeare 'was not of an age but for all time' need not be taken to endorse the hoary old claims for his universality but rather as an indication that he remain available to subsequent ages to adapt and adopt as they wish as Marsden notes:

“each new generation attempts to redefine Shakespeare’s genius in contemporary terms, projecting its desires and anxieties onto his work” (1991 1).

From the earliest days of moving pictures, directors have been obsessed with bringing William Shakespeare’s prominent plays to the screen. Akira Kurosawa’s famous renderings of *Macbeth* into *Throne of Blood* and *King Lear* into *Ran*; Kenneth Branagh’s and Baz Luhrmann’s screen adaptations of several plays of Shakespeare are noticeable. Now it’s Bollywood’s turn. The notable filmmaker Vishal Bhardwaj has achieved remarkable popularity and critical success worldwide with his two adaptations of Shakespeare, *Maqbool* (*Macbeth*) and *Omkaara* (*Othello*). Both films are very different from those postcolonial adaptations that tend to ‘talk back’ to Shakespeare. Instead Bhardwaj represents the strain of a transcultural adaptation of Shakespeare whose beginnings lay in the 19th century Parsi theatre’s first forays into indigenizing Shakespearean plays for local audiences.

Maqbool contains all the climatic ingredients which place it in the annals of a few global cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare. Although it is set in the murky underworld of Bombay (Mumbai), features Bollywood actors and draws freely upon the conventions of a typical Bollywood film. But in spite of this the film remains close to Shakespeare. In its extremely complex and successful reworking of *Macbeth* in a different genre (film), language (Hindi and Urdu), time and setting (present day Bombay), the filmmaker does not adulterate the complex issues evoked by Shakespeare’s plays. Precisely this is the reason *Maqbool* and *Omkaara* are the first Indian film adaptations of Shakespeare to have gained International recognition; they have been screened at several international film festivals and are and are discussed in Daniel Rosenthal’s *100 Shakespeare Films* (2007), published by the British Film Institute.

Maqbool is set in the criminal underworld of modern day Mumbai. Two corrupt policemen (the equivalent to the weird sisters) predict Maqbool’s rise to power by means of horoscopes, which Maqbool manages by killing Abbaji (the Duncan figure), the head of a crime family who treats Maqbool as if he were his own son. The very focus on the relationship between Abbaji-Maqbool (Duncan-Macbeth) makes Abbaji’s murder even more loaded than would be the case if Abbaji were not a father figure to Maqbool. The portrayal of the weird sisters as a pair of corrupt policemen is marked with genuine sense of its ingenuity and their having connections with the underworld. The most striking recasting is the inflaming love between Maqbool and Nimmi (wife to Abbaji) (*Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth*) as a forbidden romance. Sexual desire and ambition play the major in the love of Maqbool, Abbaji, Nimmi and the others as they are all entrapped in the mire of aforesaid. Maqbool is driven to kill Abbaji as much by his love for Nimmi as by his resentment at the idea of serving under Guddu (Fleance), who would become the heir to Abbaji’s gang through his marriage to Sameera (Abbaji’s daughter). All these instigate Maqbool to kill the father figure Abbaji just before the wedding ceremony of Guddu and Sameera. Here we have another vantage point to consider the text of *Maqbool*: Nimmi’s hatred of Abbaji which is triggered by their age difference- Abbaji is old enough to be her father and she feels repulsed by his shabby appearance – and also because Abbaji has acquired a new mistress. The very information conveyed to Maqbool by *weird sisters* that Abbaji himself killed his own boss to head the gang, fortifies Maqbool’s desire to lead the gang by killing his own boss. With the murder of Abbaji the first half comes to an end.

The second half, according to Lanier, has observed, “Closely parallels *Macbeth* in plot, motifs, and character” (Lanier 2007). For example the banquet scene in which the ghost of Banquo appears is replaced by a meeting of Maqbool’s gang from which Guddu and Kaka

(Fleance and Banquo) are missing. When Kaka's dead body is brought back, only Maqbool thinks that Kaka is alive and looking at him and so he becomes visibly disturbed. Maqbool's fear of Kaka's gaze is tied to Abbaji's murderscene in which Abbaji dies looking at Maqbool. His blood splashes over Nimmi who like her Shakespearean counterpart becomes increasingly obsessed with imaginary bloodstains. As far as the episode of moving of Birnam wood is concerned, Bhardwaj has recasted it in the form of Maqbool's attempt to offload contraband and the subsequent raid of his home. The coming of the sea is the film's suggestive parallel with Birnam wood.

Adapters of any kind do have the license to change and modify the source text according to new cultural and geographical settings. In the case of *Macbeth* it is interesting to note how various adapters have reworked its ending. Adapters like William Davenant and Giuseppe Verdi have emphasized a return from chaos to order while others such as Roman Polanski and Eugene Ionesco have depicted a cyclical pattern of violence. In the hand of Bhardwaj the ending of *Maqbool* neither goes for absolute order nor absolute chaos. On the other hand he plays upon a middle ground. As the setting of the movie is the underworld of Mumbai, at a social level it would be a kind of dishonesty on his part to suggest a movement from anarchy to order, but at a personal level order is possible. This is shown through the taking care of Nimmi's newborn baby by Guddu and Sameera in an act of humanity which transcends personal and gang rivalries. Even this suggestion is fleeting because the texture of the movie has repeatedly been suggesting that cruellest acts don't come from expected quarters of life but comes from unexpected one. This suggestion is quite perspicuous when we come to know that Abbaji killed his boss to rise to the power and Maqbool kills the man who brought him up as a son.

Besides all these, Bhardwaj decorates the texture of *Maqbool* by incorporating in it a range of visual strategies. For example we see Maqbool cooking food for the guests in a huge cauldron the day before Abbaji's murder. Later on in the day, a little before the murder, he hallucinates that blood is coming out of the cauldron, an image that provides further incitement for the act he plans to commit. Thus, while Bhardwaj departs from Shakespeare at a literal level, he nevertheless is able to bring together the cauldron and dagger scenes of *Macbeth* in a way that shows his deep understanding of their significance and his ability to incorporate them in a radically new setting. The policemen's prediction of rain, which is extremely unusual for the time of the year, comes true and creates a suitably tense atmosphere right before Abbaji's murder. It exhibits the Shakespearean technique of mirroring a breach in the human order by a breach in the natural order. The chaos in the natural order heightens the intensity of moral order. Another important aspect which must not be overlooked at any cost is Bhardwaj's use of some Bollywood conventions in *Maqbool* may be as much a matter of choice as of compulsion. In this connection presence of Bollywood trademarks such as family scenes of festivity and weddings, catchy music, dances and songs (Trivedi 153-54), including an item number is all the more strange for a filmmaker who has dismissed mainstream Bollywood as kitschy (Today Othello 2006). The reasons for this are many, but significant one is no doubt, the globalized notion that equates Bollywood with Indian cinema, in no small measure because the powerful Indian diaspora and the well-oiled publicity machines of the Bollywood industry actively promote such a view. In this scenario it becomes somewhat impossible for a filmmaker making films in Hindi to avoid and escape from the hegemony of Bollywood. In this connection Ashish Rajadhyaksha opines:

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 . . . (2003 23-39)

As an act of transposed form of adaptation and embedded appropriation *Maqbool* stands uniquely on the rich horizon of Indian cinema in particular and world cinema in general. It has the qualities to a place among a few chosen one which try to adapt Shakespeare cinematically. Bhardwaj has done a brilliant job in adapting appropriating Shakespeare's *Macbeth* into an authentic indigenized scenario by maintaining and sustaining the richness, the depthness and complexity of emotions and feelings of the original text. By doing so he at once exonerates himself with the questions of intellectual property rights, proper acknowledgements or even the charge of homage and plagiarism.

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