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All the King's men and all the King's women: reading Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* as a "creative mistranslation" of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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ABSTRACT This article attempts to read how Shakespeare's *Macbeth* lives in twenty-first century India in the form of Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool*. The article takes the recurrent tempests of religiously generated animosity in the Indian subcontinent as a textual field within which *Macbeth*, under the garb of *Maqbool*, resides. The centre/margin construct that forms the core of *Maqbool* provides us with an opportunity to ponder over our own historical moment, a moment fraught with interminable violence and hatred inspired by the politics of difference. Bhardwaj provides us with the possibility, in both *Maqbool* (based on *Macbeth*) and *Haider* (based on *Hamlet*), that Shakespeare could be directly related to the saga of relentless religious violence that plagues some South Asian countries to date. Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* reimagines Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as a struggle for power within the hierarchy of organized crime in Mumbai. The film, however, may also be seen as a glimpse into a fiercely patriarchal Islamic set-up by an equally fierce Hindu gaze. This tale of Shakespeare in a twenty-first century setting creates a sense of all-consuming foreboding whereby the polarization of Hindus and Muslims becomes more than a power game: it becomes symptomatic of Indian society where wily politicians and shrewd policemen, render a state's law machinery into a den of horrific violence. This article attempts to show that beneath the overt narrative difference between the play and the film lurks a similar political reading of both the texts. The film opens with the illusion of "other" as the "center". But gradually with numerous instances of illegitimacy like the mock-family structure, the half-caste protagonist, the illicit relationships, and above all, the entire space of the film peopled predominantly by the Muslims made illegitimate by consigning it to the mafia world, we realize that the "other", initially projected as the "center" here is not merely castigated, but defeated, defeated not from without, but from within. This article is published as part of a collection to commemorate the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare's death.

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Following the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, her nephew King James VI of Scotland ascended the throne of England and assumed the title of James I. The Gunpowder Plot of 1605, a botched conspiracy to assassinate the king, and the much publicized execution of Guy Fawkes, unveiled the simmering animosity that a section of the English population felt for the Scottish king. Shakespeare could not have had a more opportune moment to recreate his recurring theme—regicide—thus emerged *Macbeth* (1606): a deadly concoction of the political crisis emerging from the murder of a king, and the domestic relation already problematized in *Othello* (1603). Shakespeare had always been successful in making a commentary on the present by using the past as a reference point; and the present that Shakespeare comments on, in turn, never fails to be relevant for the future.

By situating the reader's experience at the heart of the interpretative process, Kott (1967) in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, asserts that Shakespeare's plays remain contemporary because of the apparently fluid, but actually static, historical conditions of time and place, conditions that plague both a sixteenth-century viewer as well as a twenty-first century viewer: "... for Shakespeare history stands still. Every chapter opens and closes at the same point.... Every great Shakespearean act is merely a repetition" (Kott, 1967: 6). This is one of the reasons why Shakespeare is contemporary, the reason why his works are extensively adapted on-screen.

A literary text is made up of a series of verbal signs that may lead to countless possible interpretations and may give rise to a plethora of adaptations. We can never assume that one director has said everything about one literary text and has exhausted all other possibilities of interpretations. In each on-screen adaptation we witness a wide range of critical interpretations or, to borrow Stam's (2000: 62) words, "creative mistranslations", at work.

The twenty-first century has had its fair share of "Bollywoodised" literary adaptations of the West. While Austen film adaptations like Gurinder Chadha's 2004 *Bride and Prejudice* (based on *Pride and Prejudice*), and Rajshri Ojha's 2010 *Aisha* (based on *Emma*), involve the complex process of blending the traditions of a once-colonised country with those of the colonizer's, Danny Boyle's 2008 *Slumdog Millionaire* may be read as a Dickensian bildungsroman where we get glimpses of a Victorian England in the recklessly fast-paced modern Mumbai. In the plights of the hero, Jamal, we find traces of hope amid despair reminding us of an Oliver Twist or a David Copperfield. Gurinder Chadha, an English director of Indian origin, and Danny Boyle, an English filmmaker, would naturally attempt to cull out, through these adaptations, a niche among the present hybridized global populace. Against a postcolonial global Indian setting as found in the Austenian and Dickensian adaptations, Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* (2004), *Omkara* (2006) and *Haider* (2014), concentrate on small, essentially indigenous, spaces that speak of problems that are quintessentially Indian. The dust, heat, filth and slums of Mumbai in *Slumdog Millionaire*, and the colour, glitz and extravagance of Indian ceremonies in *Bride and Prejudice* and *Aisha*, dish out two sides of the exotic "other" to a mongrelized mass. On the other hand, the inner workings of the Mumbai underworld in *Maqbool*, the murky politics of rural Uttar Pradesh in *Omkara*, and the age-old problem of Kashmir as a bone of contention between India and Pakistan in *Haider*, are problems that, in a way, only an Indian can easily and intensely relate to. Bhardwaj thus succeeds in *reculturalising* Shakespeare (Stam, 2000: 68) in a way that is significantly different from Chadha, Ojha, or Boyle. As Linda Hutcheon (2006), while describing the process of "indigenization", states:

The context of reception ... is just as important as the context of creation when it comes to adapting... Contemporary events or dominant images condition our perception, as well as

interpretation, as they do those of the adapter. There is a kind of dialogue between the society in which the works, both the adapted text and adaptation, are produced and that in which they are received, and both are in dialogue with the works themselves (2006, 149).

Adaptations vary with the passage of time and with alteration of location. But somehow there continues a persistent "dialogue" between the source text and the adapted text as well as between the "receivers" of the two, because the historical moments, to borrow from Kott, keep repeating themselves, disregarding time, space and culture. This article attempts to show how Vishal Bhardwaj, despite spatial, temporal and cultural distances, "creatively mistranslates" Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and yet remains faithful to its basic theme.

Bhardwaj's own fascination for cinematic projection of social disorder, especially his portrayal of the crime world in *Maqbool* (2004), *Omkara* (2006), *Kaminey* (2009) and *Haider* (2014), as well as his love of threatened characters unsurprisingly made him turn to Shakespeare. Shakespeare's plot-driven plays of lust, murder and intrigue with a tight form and structure may well be read as nothing less than intense psychological crime thrillers. Thus Bhardwaj took his first apprehensive, yet firm, step towards cinematic Shakespeare with *Maqbool*.

Subtly layered by numerous oblique references to *The Godfather* (1972), Vishal Bhardwaj recreates *Macbeth* into *Maqbool*. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is set in Scotland, which would have been faintly alien to his English audience—hence the "Three Weird Sisters" and surreal ambience of the play. This sense of alienness is brought forth in *Maqbool* by a strong attachment to Islam, the "other" in India, amongst the film's main characters. By replacing Scotland, with a legitimate ruler (Duncan), by the murky Mumbai underworld, the very space of the film and thereby the "other" that defines this space is rendered illegitimate. Here Macbeth becomes Miyan Maqbool (Irfan Khan); Duncan is played by Pankaj Kapoor as Jahangir Khan aka Abbaji; and Lady Macbeth is Nimmi (Tabu), and, in a marked departure from the original, as if to create another layer of illegitimacy, is the latest in a series of nubile concubines of Abbaji.

Anthony Davies describes Macbeth as a complex study in character, as one who is "human in his reflections and inhumane in his actions" (quoted by Brode, 2000: 191). Vishal Bhardwaj succeeds in projecting this contradiction in *Maqbool*, while directors like Orson Welles and Roman Polanski fail. In Welles' *Macbeth* (1948), Macbeth is throughout a "dislikable protagonist" from the first scene to the last, while Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971) fails to stage a human drama as Macbeth does not gain any profundity of character with the progression of his career. He simply seems to be a counterpart of the static villain Richard III¹. On the other hand, Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth* is a tragic hero from the very first scene. Kurzel significantly departs from Shakespeare as he opens his film with the burial of Baby Macbeth. The very opening exonerates the bereaved parents from the sins they are about to commit in the audience's eyes. Macbeth in Kurzel *fails* to become evil. The career of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in Kurzel becomes an unending reminder of a loss that can never be compensated; and Kurzel's *Macbeth* (2015) becomes a saga of how power remains a poor substitute for grief.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* depicts a psychological journey where the protagonist is ultimately transformed into a "sadder but wiser" character at the end of the play, one who gradually realizes his limited place in the universe. *Maqbool*, on the other hand, begins his journey with full realization of his limited and thoroughly marginal place in society. *Maqbool*, like *Macbeth*, is a man who constantly oscillates between the twin forces of ambition and guilt. Yet apart from the urge to usurp authority,

Maqbool is further goaded by his love for Nimmi and by his craving for legitimacy. Unlike Shakespeare, the issue of legitimacy runs deeper in *Maqbool*. The craving for a “proper” social recognition is an added layer in *Maqbool* which we do not find in other major adaptations of the play. While Roman Polanski or Justin Kurzel remain faithful to the time and setting of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, thereby making it unnecessary for the protagonists to contemplate their legitimate status in society, even Washizu (based on the character of Macbeth) in Akira Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* (1957) is an integral part of Japanese warrior class, one who is more a representative of the spirit of his age than an outsider. Like *Maqbool*, *The Throne of Blood* is not a direct cinematic rendition of Shakespeare’s eleventh-century Scottish world. Deeply steeped in the tradition of Noh theatre, Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* portrays Washizu as a type, a warrior of medieval Japan, one who very much belongs to the mainstream and hence not in need of pondering over issues of legitimacy. In *Maqbool*, on the other hand, this preoccupation with legitimacy takes many forms: it is in the half-caste illegitimate Maqbool’s desire to eventually replace Abbaji as the new gang land boss; it is also found in Nimmi’s preoccupation with marriage to Maqbool, and her constantly iterated declaration to Maqbool that their love is pure or “paak”. Maqbool’s yearning to supplant Abbaji is illegitimate not primarily because of the means he will eventually adopt to realize it, for power is not his central temptation. His desire springs mainly from his fatal passion for Abbaji’s mistress, and at another level, from his attempt to transcend his own illegitimate identity. Macbeth’s career moves from being a thane to a king, while Maqbool’s career progresses from being a trusted follower of Abbaji to a failed attempt of gaining legitimate power ironically in an illegitimate hierarchy of Mumbai mafiadom. It is noteworthy that Maqbool is undone by being the epitome of “Muslim vice”. When Maqbool’s ascension to power is threatened by the dangerous passion evolving between Abbaji’s legitimate daughter Sameera and her lover Guddu, the son of a Hindu Brahmin Kaka, the domination of Hindu power and the issue of legitimacy subverts the onscreen supremacy of both characters and actors.

At the very outset of the film we are confronted with a strongly patriarchal set-up: gangster heroes in Bollywood replace families with the mafia and allegiance to the clan becomes synonymous with fealty servitude to the Boss. The world of this mock-family structure in the film is predominantly Muslim as is evident through the characters’ appearances (dresses, countenance, spoken language), repeated visits to the “darga”, the funeral at the beginning of the film, the ritual slaughter of a goat, a henchman’s refusal to resort to alcohol, the recurrent scenes of characters conducting themselves in prayers, references to “Ramadan”, celebration of “Eid”, where the Hindu characters Kaka and his son Guddu occupy a subordinate role in the hierarchy of power and organized crime. Thus, Maqbool’s treachery and the consequent death race in the film may apparently seem very much a result of intra-communal conflict, where Muslims kill Muslims.

The mock-family structure located within the Muslim community, a structure bereft of family values, their history strewn with patricides (committed by Abbaji, and later Maqbool), the latter literally validating what in essence is mock, betrays a Hindu gaze. Counterpoised to this sacrilege of family values is the serenity of frames capturing the Hindu family space of Kaka and Guddu. In fact, instance of legitimacy is found only in the household of Kaka, nowhere else. It may further be noted that the mock-family structure of *Maqbool*, though loosely based on *The Godfather* (1972), is actually in sharp contrast to genuine family ties in the mafia world of *The Godfather*, where tenderness within family balances ruthlessness outside it. As Thomas Leitch shares Mario Puzo’s sentiment about the film in *Crime Films* (2002):

“The Godfather was essentially a film about a family that happened to be in crime rather than a crime film whose criminal organization happened to be that of a family” (Leitch 116). One of the core issues that *The Godfather* dabbles with is the question of “what it means to be a member of a family” (Leitch, 2002: 118). Don Corleone and his sons never ponder over the issue of legitimacy as far as the family is concerned. Maqbool, on the other hand, being the protagonist of the film is constantly plagued by the need for legitimacy. Both in terms of time devoted, and in terms of poignancy, Irfan Khan as Maqbool occupies the centre of the narrative. In fact, Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri, both very prominent figures in the Bollywood hierarchy, had to be made comical in appearance so that they could look dwarfed by Irfan’s presence on the screen. Despite occupying the centre of the film’s narrative, Miyan Maqbool is assailed by doubts. His doubts regarding the yet-to-be-born child of Nimmi, Nimmi’s desperate efforts to assure him that their love is pure (paak), and Maqbool’s agonizing attempts to be convinced that the child belongs to him, are instances of an illegitimate Muslim overreacher’s craving for legitimacy through assimilation. His struggles may be read as a desperate cry for generational survival as he stands outside each and every category of what is known as the “center”. Bhardwaj here mirrors Shakespeare’s sentiment that no defeat is complete until the vanquished themselves acknowledge their lives’ inadequacy.

Shakespeare’s Macbeth initially tries to come to terms with the terrible fact he discovers: the potential for evil within himself. Herein resides Shakespeare’s difficulty. Hamlet, however deranged, constantly attempts to do the right thing. Othello and Brutus, despite their fatal errors, cannot be labelled as evil. Shakespeare’s real challenge lay in transmuting a man, like Richard III who consciously performs evil deeds, into an eponymous tragic hero. Macbeth is Shakespeare’s study of duality, of man, swinging between the good and evil within. Shakespeare could surprisingly evoke sympathy for a man who consciously embraces evil, knows the consequences, and yet continues down the aberrant path without paying much heed to the outcome.

Bhardwaj’s Maqbool, on the other hand, is a natural extension of the murky underbelly of the Mumbai mafia world. He is born into an “evil” space. So evil is not an option for him, it is a compulsory part of his existence. It is in this space of all-pervading evil that he tries to retain some vestige of loyalty towards the lord of the mafiadom. Yet he remains acutely conscious of his secondary position. Thus the sudden spark of hope brought on by Nimmi precipitates his sudden rampage. Macbeth is a once-loyal hero who chooses to yield to his latent desires, though not without self-examination. Maqbool seems to be more a character acted upon, acted upon not by Nimmi, but by a more sinister power structure at work. Although it may seem that it is Nimmi’s taunts of Maqbool’s masculinity and her unabashed sexuality which really disrupts the mock-family structure of Abbaji. However, a closer examination shows that the comical and corrupt police inspectors (“Purohit” and “Pandit”), a version of Macbeth’s three hags, who prophesy Maqbool’s ascension to power and also bring about Maqbool’s death (by deliberately leaving “Riyaz Boti”, Maqbool’s adversary, alive) are the real choreographers who chart the rise and fall of these characters, under the pretext of retaining a balance of power (Shakti ka santulan).

Significantly, these two police inspectors are projected as quite prominently Hindu. Their eager zest for astrology, the wearing of their hair in “shikhas”, their elaborate discussions on the power of “Shani”, “Mangal” and “Shukra”, and their repeated references to the ill-effects of “grahan”, gives us an uneasy sensation that we are after all dealing not with intra-communal, but inter-communal

violence. A shot of red-turbaned Hindus confronting Maqbool's prominently Muslim followers in front of Kaka's house; and after Kaka's assassination, the close shot of a Hindu deity dissolving into a very pronounced Muslim ambience where Abbaji's death ceremony is being conducted, brings forth an uneasy reminder of the cyclic storms of religiously fomented violence that plagues India even today.

It is significant that the film, which deals mainly with Muslim characters and Islamic rituals, begins with an ominous close shot of a rectangular astrological diagram drawn on a foggy bus window, a very pronounced Hindu symbol. And this diagram recurs throughout the narrative of the film. The opening scene of *Maqbool* is cyclic in structure. It begins with a close shot of the astrological chart, where Mumbai's future is predicted and ends with another close shot of the same diagram, this time spattered with the blood of a Muslim henchman, one of Abbaji's rival gang members. We then hear a slightly irritated voice of Pandit: *Saari Mumbai khoon se bhar diya*. (You have drenched Mumbai with blood). The cyclic structure of the scene is in tune with the central concern of the policemen, that is, retaining a "balance" of forces to ensure an interminable cycle of violence. Vishal Bhardwaj, here, departs significantly from Shakespeare in the sense that the supernatural soliciting of the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* has no power in itself. Any power that the "Weird Sisters" have is parasitic on Macbeth's nature and ambition. They derive their power from their initial articulation of Macbeth's latent desire. They rely on his response to represent whatever they are. Macbeth's thinking gives them the significance of "evil be thou my good". Therefore, it is not the "Witches" but Macbeth himself who allows the Witches' utterances to enslave his mind. Just as Macbeth becomes the Thane of Cawdor without having to do much but continue being "noble Macbeth", he could as well have become the king of Scotland without killing Duncan as he himself says:

If Chance will have me King, why, Chance/ may crown me, /
Without my stir' (Shakespeare, 2008, I. 3: 144–145).

But overcoming his own doubts, he deliberately succumbs to the temptation voiced by the Weird Sisters with all-consciousness of the evil he is embracing:

'Stars, hide your fires!
Let not light see my black and deep desires;
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see (Shakespeare, 2008, I. 4: 50–53).

This is not the case with Maqbool. He pays no heed to the prophecies of Pandit until his first prediction (that Maqbool would control the Mumbai film industry) comes true. Even after the fulfilment of the first prophecy, the thought of acting according to the predictions of Pandit do not cross Maqbool's mind. And yet he is annihilated. Thus the power of the two police inspectors is not dependent on Maqbool's actions. In fact, throughout the film, Maqbool seems more a passive recipient. We find here a subversion of Macbeth's personal tragedy, as Maqbool becomes more of a puppet in the hands of a larger political game where he is merely used as a pawn by political leaders like "Bhonsle" and "Palekar", and law keepers like "Pandit" and "Purohit".

The three Weird Sisters of *Macbeth* are shown as agents of a malevolent Fate. In Shakespeare they acquire their power by selling their souls to Satan and are controlled by familiar spirits on Earth. They have the power of foreknowledge, and may predict what fate has in store but they are not Fate themselves.

Unlike the Weird Sisters, by invoking "balance" and by promoting it through their own insidious activity, *Maqbool's* Hindu officers not only foresee the workings of fate, but identify themselves with it. When this tale of lust and murder, bloodshed and treachery is at its full sway, one of the officers (Pandit) warns his partner (Purohit) not to eat Saturn, when he finds him picking up a piece of sweet which has been used as a figure in the astrological chart constructed of sweets, since Saturn eats people. "Whom shall it swallow?" asks Purohit, chewing on another piece of the chart. His partner replies, smiling, "Who do you want eaten?" Thus they are not merely agents of Fate, easing the world of an imbalance of evil; they are at times Fate itself.

Thus the ultimate king-makers are two police officers whose names are significantly "Purohit" and "Pandit". "Purohit" may be defined as a sanctioned practitioner of religion with immense power wielding capacity in society. And "Pandit", an erudite/ a producer of knowledge: one who is entrusted with the task of rationalizing and thereby legitimizing the power the purohit wields. Seen from this perspective the image of the astrological chart of Mumbai, almost obliterated by stains of the blood of a Muslim man, at the beginning of the film assumes a new significance. It is "Purohit" who washes the destiny of the city with the blood of a Muslim henchman. Unsurprisingly, the prediction is done by "Pandit" and the execution by "Purohit". Thus what initially seems as a towering invincible Islamic power structure at the centre of the story is later reduced to a stifled, confined Muslim community, circumscribed, moulded and contained by the Hindu authorities with the age-old ideological weapons of caste, erudition and state machinery represented by the two so-called "law-keepers".

Maqbool projects a strongly Islamic household that reverberates with petty vendettas, extortion, intoxication, mean plots, and illicit sex. Abbaji's home is an abode of inverted values (like Inverness) where the father-son relationship is brutally disregarded. In such a murky setting, the ousting of Maqbool by Guddu, a Hindu Brahmin, as the future gang land lord; the marriage of Sameera to Guddu and their adoption of Nimmi and Maqbool's child; their successful attempt of bringing this illegitimate child within the folds of legitimacy, all breathe of a work that treats the Muslim community as an object of a biased Hindu gaze. Sameera is doubly removed from the centre being at the patriarchal fringe of the illegitimate fringe and hence in need of marriage into a Hindu family to be *fully* legitimate. Thus, ousting of Maqbool by Guddu juxtaposed with Guddu "marrying" Sameera is a polite depiction of an archetype of domination of one community by another in a patriarchal setting, with the institution of marriage giving the process the ultimate stamp of legitimacy. Adoption of the child of Nimmi and Maqbool by Guddu and Sameera is at the same time a marker for usurpation of power and sanitization of this usurpation.

While Sameera is twice removed from the centre, Nimmi fulfils every requisite of the margin. She is a Muslim woman from Lucknow with a murky past, staying with Abbaji outside the bonds of wedlock, and sharing an illicit relationship with Abbaji's most trusted follower Maqbool. She disregards every possible normative category of the mainstream. Nimmi is a continuum of cinematic clichés employed by the Hindi film industry in its depiction of the "fallen" woman. As expected, disregarding temporal and geo-political limitations, the strategies adopted by the effective political system/s for taming deviant/ threatening female sexuality remain the same, whether in Shakespeare or in Vishal Bhardwaj. Bhardwaj here closely follows Shakespeare in the sense that in both the texts we have women who create confusion in the realm of mental representation by exhibiting the so-called "masculine" traits of their characters: aberrant,

uncontrolled, having a will of their own and imposing that will on their male counterpart. They therefore pose a threat to the patriarchal structure and consequently unsettle or destabilize the object-world. Thus in order to re-establish the complacency of a reassuring object-world, such aberrant characters need to be contained.

At the apex of their power in the texts, the women manage to upset the clearly identifiable and categorizable patriarchal depiction of womanhood by their repeated incursions into the world of heterosexual male-bonding. The courtly world of *Macbeth* and the gangland world of *Maqbool* are rigidly controlled by fiercely patriarchal structures. Women function here as consorts, mistresses, or daughters—with identities subsumed in their male sponsors. Nimmi and Lady Macbeth encroach upon a privileged world of male existence, and arrogate a valorized masculine idiom as they urge their partners to action. The women may retain all their cherished weapons of a successful feminine enterprise which are manifest in snide remarks, cruel rejoinders, and not-so-subtle displays of their wiles. Lady Macbeth of course makes a definite departure from the passive/aggressive Nimmi with her demand: “Come, you spirits/ That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here” (Shakespeare, 2008, I. 5: 40–41). Nimmi is several steps further from Lady Macbeth as she is not even legitimized within the socially accepted references of a family. However, it is ironical that both the “legitimate” wife of Macbeth and the “illegitimate” concubine of Jahangir Khan (Abbaji) who stands outside most of the known normative categories of a “decent woman” rely on deceptions and manipulations to achieve their ends. In this respect, Lady Macbeth does not seem to be much better off than her Indian counterpart. Even if a woman remains within the folds of a legitimate construct, she will not be spared if she commits the “illegitimate” act of venturing into the male domain.

Both Lady Macbeth and Nimmi, separated by an immense temporal and spatial gulf, nevertheless share the same fate—insanity. By problematizing the accepted and sanctioned role-playing of a passive female, by actively seducing their men and coercing them for murder, they come dangerously close to shaping their own destiny, menacingly close to controlling the narrative—and hence should be shown their proper place. Patriarchy can return to its comfort zone only after these women become the acquiescing victims of their own untamed desires. The two weapons used by the women to enter and exploit the male world—mind and body—need to be destroyed. While Lady Macbeth sleepwalks in a white gown amid the dark sterile castle walls, her body open to the stark gaze of the Doctor and the Gentle woman (more starkly represented by Polanski where she is shown as completely naked); Nimmi is a bloated woman confined within the four walls of the house. Rather than becoming a symbol of fertility, she is reduced to a kind of pitying object to be humiliated and abused by Guddu and Sameera. The very weapons the women use to manipulate the narrative become objects of contempt and disgust. They are emptied of all strength to the point that they have nothing left to contribute to the narrative: a sterile empty shell for a body and a devastated mind unable to cohabit any longer with sanity.

Patriarchy closes ranks by marginalizing these fearsome femme fatales by driving them to insanity, often constructed as a “female malady”. It denotes a clear shift in the understanding of madness as a gendered disorder, because Elizabethan constructs of madness as a form of sanity had been cast in male form. As any Shakespeare critic worth his/her salt knows, madness is an attenuated state of existence only for the privileged male (*vis-à-vis* King Lear and Hamlet). In women it is always shown as a contemptible disease, a means of reducing them to objects under the scrutiny of a hypercritical male gaze.²

Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking and Nimmi’s descent into madness are shown neither as mere pathological conditions, nor as higher states of existence where they gain a heightened insight, but rather as moral states—a marker of incipient damnation. Bhardwaj remains faithful to the Elizabethan construct of insanity. Nimmi’s madness at best may evoke pity and at worst contempt. In a marked departure from her prototype, Nimmi becomes a mother, at least fulfilling one set role of a woman, giving birth to a male child who ultimately becomes a trophy won by Guddu and Sameera, a final marker of the triumph of the mainstream. While the woman, during and after her pregnancy, groping for her ever-receding sanity, remains confined both literally and metaphorically. The feisty woman who could hold her own with her innuendoes among her male peers, vanishes, and is replaced by a creature pathetic in her obsessive, compulsive post-partum insanity. In her final descent into madness, we see Nimmi trying to wash the invisible blood stains from her bedroom wall. Vishal Bhardwaj executes this scene with a dual perspective. We watch Maqbool as he watches Nimmi cleaning those “damned spots”, and simultaneously see her reflected in the wardrobe mirror. Madness witnessed and shaped by such a plurality of gazes, therefore, becomes easily replicable as the fate of any Indian woman transgressing her given boundaries. The last we see of this woman who problematizes the male/female binary is her corpse covered by her own dupatta, a conventional symbol of modesty and honour of an Indian woman transformed into her own “kafn” (shroud).

Thus *Maqbool* may be seen as a text richly layered with several levels of hierarchy: the initial illusion of the “margin” occupying the “center”, gives way to the ultimate containment and annihilation of the transgressors, the “marginal” trying to occupy the “center” and their relegation to their assigned position as prescribed by an upper class Hindu male society. *Maqbool* offers us the space for a gendered reading of Nimmi, as well as a more secular, questioning and skeptical reading of human aspirations in the form of the tragic hero Maqbool. Perhaps it is the force of the history of communal violence which haunts our everyday world that has provided an impetus for Bhardwaj to create parallels between the tantalizing interplay of illusion and reality that provoke the mad bloody acts of the lost Macbeths of the sixteenth century and the confused feelings about legitimacy, blood, evil, and revenge that plague Maqbool and Nimmi of the twenty-first century. Horror has leapt out of the “sacrosanct” world of religious discrimination and intolerance and has exploded on screen in the form of *Maqbool*, which has found its natural abode in Shakespeare, a playwright, equally intrigued by the idea of how far a system can go to eliminate or annihilate differences.

Quite in keeping with this spirit, the film ends with the death of Maqbool and his partner in crime and love Nimmi; and the rising of a legitimate son of a Hindu Brahmin, Guddu, as the next gangland boss. A film that begins with a powerful minority community that decides the fates of politicians ends with the wrenching away of that power from it. When we shift our gaze from the centre to the margins of *Maqbool*, behind all the brutality, shady dealings and horrific violence that characterize this Islamic world, we sense the presence of a far more sinister power structure at work. The film is an indication of the politicization of the police force and an unpleasant reminder of their repeated overt or covert involvement in communal violence as they act in accordance with the partisan interests of the State. Similarly a woman who has the strength to hold her own in a fiercely patriarchal structure ends up as a pathetic creature with age-old epithets of a “witch” or a “whore” heaped on her. Transgression in any form must be punished—be it in Shakespeare or in Bhardwaj—be it in the realms of gender as in

Macbeth or in the realms of both gender and religion as in *Maqbool*, echoing Shakespeare's warning that rebellion is an unwise political option, especially if you are in the margins.

Notes

- 1 Kenneth Rothwell's (2004) *History of Shakespeare on Screen* has been consulted for a critical reading of screened Shakespeare down the ages and to understand how the filmmakers have reimagined and recreated Shakespeare's plays.
- 2 According to Berger (1972), constant social conditioning splits a woman's self in two, the *surveyor* and the *surveyed*: "She has to survey ... everything she does because ... how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life" (46). Sleepwalking in *Lady Macbeth* and insanity in *Nimmi* are instances where the *surveyors within* cease to function. Without the supervision of the surveyor, the surveyed becomes an unrestrained stark exhibit, at the mercy of the male gaze.

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Data availability

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no data sets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Additional information

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