

## Shakespeare Adaptations in Bollywood: An Appreciation of Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* and *Omkara*

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### ABSTRACT

It is a cliché to talk about the sustained popularity and relevance of William Shakespeare's works, particularly his plays, in the contemporary times. The omnipotence of the Bard in the domain of performance and media arts is an established fact. However, an interesting facet of the Bard's plays is that these have been constantly re-envisaged and reworked from the time they have been there. The various film adaptations of his plays can be cited as contemporary evidence in support of this aforesaid statement. His plays have been adapted into films across the globe and these adaptations have been done in such a way as to suit the local colour. One such instance is a set of three films, namely *Maqbool*, *Omkara* and *Haider* adapted from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Hamlet* respectively by the Indian filmmaker Vishal Bhardwaj. This paper attempts to explore the points of convergence and divergence between two of Bhardwaj's films, *Maqbool* and *Omkara*, and the original play-texts of Shakespeare, and will also try to show what effects the recasting of several elements by Bhardwaj have on the overall designs of the films.

### KEYWORDS

Adaptation, Bollywood, Shakespeare, *Maqbool*, *Omkara*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*

The idea of using source material from literature in cinema has been in vogue since the beginning of the latter, most of the earliest films being adaptations of literary works. If we take the year 1900 as a point of reference, we find titles like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp*, based on well-known masterpieces, to

be already popular on screen. The reasons for filmmakers turning to literature for their plot lines have been numerous. Apart from the stories being well-known and film adaptations of these stories being a way of bringing the iconic works of literature to the masses, a very important reason for filmmakers using material from literature, in the opinion of

Cartmell, is a belief harboured by many of them “that a dependency on literature or ‘great art’ would also elevate the status of the film” (2). Whatever might be the reason behind literature providing the source material for filmmakers, one thing which cannot be denied for sure is the fact that the most sought after literary figure whose works have always inspired the world of cinema is Shakespeare, a playwright whose plays have not only been adapted into features, but a few like *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Comedy of Errors*, etc., have more than a hundred adapted versions from across the globe, thereby adding to his legion of discursivity. In fact, such a rich source has been Shakespeare’s oeuvre for adaptation and appropriation that, as Fischlin and Fortier point out, “[a]s long as there have been plays by Shakespeare, there have been adaptations of those plays” (1).

In India, Shakespeare has had a fairly long history. As Charry and Shahani point out, Shakespeare’s plays were performed in India first in Calcutta and Bombay in the 1770s “as entertainment to the early traders”, before being “eventually made a staple of an educational system dictated by colonial policy, and soon after translated into Indian languages and played on stage in Calcutta, Bombay, and other urban centres...” (107). In Bollywood (a term which is a blend of ‘Bombay’ and ‘Hollywood’, and refers to India’s premier Hindi film industry), the Bard has enjoyed a sustained popularity, with the first known adaptations being the 1927 silent film *Dil Farosh*, based on *The Merchant of Venice*, the 1932 film *Hathili Dulhan*, based on *The Taming of the Shrew*, and Shorab Modi’s *Khoon ka Khoon* in 1935 and *Said-e-Havas* in 1936, based on *Hamlet* and *King John* respectively. It is pertinent to point out here that these cinematic endeavours were greatly inspired by Parsi theatre productions which frequently turned to Shakespeare for plotlines.

The practice of this kind of adaptation has always been acceptable in the Indian artistic traditions which have never perceived it as indicative of a lack of originality of any kind but have rather permitted “rewritings to exist without challenging the status of the ‘original’ urtext” (Trivedi 53). In the multilingual context of the subcontinent, this practice of adaptation, as Trivedi points out, has always functioned as “localizing, indigenizing, and ultimately democratizing factor: just as the Sanskrit epics had been reworked in the regional languages, so was Shakespeare adapted into local cultures” (53). In the post-independence era, *Shakespeare Wallah*, produced and released in 1965 by Merchant Ivory Production Company, was the first film which attempted to appropriate the Shakespeare canon and, through this appropriation, question “the cultural purpose and position of the Bard and more broadly British culture within India” while simultaneously employing “the signifiers of a proto-Bollywood – song and dance sequences, fandom, opulence, and fantasy – to suggest the rise of Indian nationhood” (Kapadia 46). However, while a film like *Shakespeare Wallah* mourns “the decline of the classic purity of the original”, as Chakravarti puts it, it is not until Vishal Bhardwaj released his films like *Maqbool* (based on *Macbeth*) in 2003 and *Omkaara* (based on *Othello*) in 2006, which “indigenize and assimilate Shakespeare into popular Bollywood idiom”, that ‘Bollywood Shakespeare’, a term Chakravarti uses to refer to “the growing interest in Shakespearean themes within the mainstream, commercial Bombay (now Mumbai)-based film industry of India”, comes into its own (127, 128). Some people might wish to point out that the Gulzar-directed *Angoor*, a remake of *The Comedy of Errors*, released in 1982 and starring iconic Bollywood actors like Utpal Dutt and Sanjeev Kumar, was the first well-known post-independence Bollywood production based on

a Shakespearean play. However, as Charry and Shahani point out, *Angoor* was publicised mainly as a story of twins and more often than not precluded any reference to Shakespeare (108). On the other hand, in Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* and *Omkara*, the two films on which this article focuses, the filmmaker expresses his indebtedness to Shakespeare in no uncertain terms, more so in the latter than in the former, of course. In discussing these two films, this article takes into consideration two central issues: first, the situating of the films in the Indian context, and second, how the transmutation of the medium and the subsequent technical incursions have affected the original narrative. But, before venturing into this endeavour, it becomes imperative to make an attempt to understand the concept of the 'Bollywood Masala Film', a genre to which the two films under consideration belong.

A typical 'Bollywood Masala Film', named after 'masala', which means a mixture of spices of different kinds in Indian cuisine, is one in which there is a curious mix of a plethora of emotive genres – tragic, comic, action, romance and melodrama, with an ample dosage of music, diegetic songs and spectacular dance routines, lavishly impressive marriage spectacles and so on. In other words, in Bollywood films, disparate elements which are even incompatible with one another come under the same roof, the primary objective being to provide entertainment. The aesthetic conventions of this kind of films is possibly captured effectively in Rushdie's phrase "Epico-Mythico-Tragico-Comico-Super-Sexy-High-Masala Art" (148). It is through this kind of a genre that Shakespeare adaptation has largely happened in Indian cinema although, as García-Periago says, "Shakespeare has also proved an accommodating friend to the codes of Indian arty, parallel cinema in locally inflected productions such as *In Othello* (dir. Roysten Abel, 2003) or the movie *The Last*

*Lear* (dir. Rituparno Ghosh, 2007)" (63). However, it is pertinent to point out here that "Bollywood's appropriation of Shakespeare has not been (in its narrowest sense) a postcolonial endeavor, aiming to 'write back' to the empire through its usurpation of the colonial Ur-text" (Shahani and Charry 162). It is important to bear this point in mind in our appreciation of *Maqbool* for although the film resituates Shakespeare in the Indian milieu by transposing the Scotland of Shakespeare's play to the world of the Mumbai underworld, which is predominantly Muslim, it does not attempt to contest the authority of the canonical English text. *Maqbool* retains the main plotline and characters of *Macbeth*: Macbeth is Maqbool and Lady Macbeth is Nimmi; while Duncan and Banquo are respectively Abba-ji and Kaka, Fleance and Malcolm are represented in Guddu. In addition, Macduff is named Boti while Duncan's sons are represented in Sameera and the witches become the two corrupt policemen, Purohit and Pandit. Obviously, the mise-en-scène of Bhardwaj's film changes owing to the differences between the cultural matrices of the film and Shakespeare's play, but what is really striking is the ingenious way in which Bhardwaj recasts a few things. Among them, mention must first be made of the fact that unlike in Shakespeare's play, where Macbeth's ambition to become the King of Scotland spurs him on to murder Duncan, abetted and aided by his wife, Lady Macbeth, in Bhardwaj's film, several reasons precipitate the betrayal and murder of Abba-ji by Maqbool, who is shown to be caught in a cobweb of ambition, love and jealousy. Unlike in Shakespeare's play, where Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are man and wife, Maqbool and Nimmi, who is Abba-ji's mistress, are in a forbidden relationship for Abba-ji is, after all, a father figure to Maqbool. Apart from this lustful relationship, which possibly serves as an incitement, another provocation for Maqbool is the possibility of his having to

serve under Guddu, who would be the heir to Abba-ji's gang following his marriage to Sameera, Abba-ji's daughter. Maqbool is very much aware that the Guddu-Sameera relationship has the potential of jeopardizing his high position in the gang and, hence, he gets rid of Abba-ji on the night before Guddu's marriage with Sameera is to take place. The act is hastened by Maqbool coming to know from the two policemen that Abba-ji himself was no saint; he killed his mentor to take over the reins of the gang. The recasting of the three witches of *Macbeth*, whose prophecy leads to the sowing of the seeds of ambition in Macbeth's mind, as two corrupt astrologer-policemen, Purohit and Pandit, who have deep connections with the underworld, is brilliant, to say the least. These two not only predict the future at appropriate junctures, feeding Maqbool with the necessary pieces of information about the astrological developments in his birth-chart and indicating the repercussions of the movement of stars, but they also seem to control the fate of the characters. Their decision not to eliminate Boti (Macduff) towards the end turns to be crucial since it is Boti who ultimately kills Maqbool. Hence the two policemen, apart from making predictions, are intricately involved in the development of the action in the film. Two other instances of Bhardwaj's reworking of the original play seem noteworthy. One is the prophecy of the witches in the play that Macbeth will be vanquished only when Birnam Wood moves to Dunsinane hill. In Bhardwaj's film, the two policemen prophecy that Maqbool's end will occur when the sea, which is the film's suggested parallel with the play's Birnam Wood, moves to his house. This is what happens, metaphorically though, when port officials in Mumbai successfully prevent Maqbool's attempt at smuggling in contraband and subsequently raid his house. In another significant departure from the original, Bhardwaj makes us focus on the pregnancy of

Nimmi and the subsequent birth of her child, which is born out of wedlock. In this, *Maqbool* seems to be directly influenced by Kurosawa's 1957 Japanese adaptation of *Macbeth*, *Throne of Blood*, in which Nimmi's counterpart, Asaji, is also shown to be pregnant although she ultimately suffers from a miscarriage. That Nimmi's child survives and is shown to be taken care of by Abba-ji's daughter, Sameera and Guddu, who is Maqbool's rival, prevents the film from offering a "uniformly bleak vision" (Sen 230). Through this act, the film "explores the possibility of escape from violence" not in a return to order for things remain unchanged in the Mumbai underworld but at a personal level this act surely comes across as "an act of humanity that transcends gang rivalries" (Sen 230).

Just as the Scottish setting in *Macbeth* is transposed to the Mumbai underworld in *Maqbool*, the exotic settings of Venice and Cyprus in *Othello* are transposed to the rustic Uttar Pradesh town of Meerut in Bhardwaj's 2006 film *Omkara*. *Othello* has always been a popular play in India, with "the history of *Othello* productions in India [going] back to the nineteenth century" (Charry and Shahani 109). Talking about *Othello* reception in India and the reasons for its popularity, Chakravarti has the following to say:

Dealing as it does with marriage and love, *Othello* has generic affinities with comedy or domestic drama rather than with heroic or classical tragedy. This could be one of the reasons why in Indian translations, adaptations, and critiques, the play is always treated as a text which articulates individual freedom and romantic love against patriarchal dictates and familial pressure. . . . The focus is on the themes of love, romance, and marriage. Race is only one component in the romantic plot (42).

Here it is important to point out that the theme of racial difference in *Othello* is recast as that of caste difference in *Omkara*, a theme which is “particularly appropriate to the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, where the film is set and where caste-based demagoguery still plays a vital role in local politics” (Sen 234). If *Othello* is the ‘Other’ in Shakespeare’s play, owing to his being a Moor, *Omkara* is marked as the ‘Other’ in Bhardwaj’s film owing to his identity as ‘half-caste’, being born of a ‘high caste’ father and a ‘low caste’ mother. In addition to his being ‘half caste’, *Omkara*’s dark skin makes him a subject of constant banter in the film. However, the issue of caste difference is underplayed in *Omkara* to a great extent as another theme, the theme of misogyny, takes centre stage. In this regard, Sen makes an important observation:

A range of misogynist attitudes gets amplified in *Omkara* as comprising that universe which sustains male crime, criminal politics, and those codes of honour that blur the line between honourable gangsters and violent husbands. This misogyny, which underscores Dolly’s fractured relationship with her father, also runs through Bhaisaab’s anti-women jokes at *Omkara* and Dolly’s wedding and the philandering of an otherwise charming Kesu; and it lies at the root of *Omkara*’s tragic jealousy (236).

In the above discussion, we have seen how in Bhardwaj’s films *Maqbool* and *Omkara*, the filmmaker has refashioned the spirit of the original play-texts with his vision but attempting to understand the films solely from the point of view of how the contextualization has happened would delimit greatly the scope and comprehensiveness of the same. The study of adaptations primarily consists of the study of how the transfer of medium takes place from one genre to another and how the new product is delivered “to new audiences by

means of the aesthetic conventions of an entirely different generic process...” (Sanders 20). This further rakes up the issue of allegiance, fidelity, etc. Bodeen in his essay, “The Adapting Art” claims that “[A]dapting literary works to film is, without a doubt, a creative undertaking, but the task requires a kind of selective interpretation, along with the ability to recreate and sustain an established mood” (349). It is pertinent to point out here that often three main reasons are given because of which a filmmaker might make major changes in adapting a literary work. One is simply the change demanded by the visual medium. The other change is to highlight new themes or emphasise different traits in a character. And the third is the change necessary to make the original story applicable to a contemporary or a culturally distinct audience. In the previous sections, the recasting of a few things in Bhardwaj’s films and their effect have already been discussed. Of the three reasons for change mentioned above, it would be fruitful now to discuss the first facet, for which *Omkara* would be an ideal example. While in *Othello* it can be seen that *Othello*’s character traits, the stories of his bravado and sagacity are either narrated by his consorts or by himself, in *Omkara*, the camera becomes the omniscient narrator. Hence the viewers get to know about *Omkara* from the multitude of shots that the filmmaker incorporates in the film. There are close-ups and tight shots of *Omkara*’s muscular body as well as recurring frames that show *Omkara* pulverizing his opponents by smashing them to the ground as a signature of his brawniness. Complimenting these shots is a musical track in the background, *Dham dham dharam dharaiya re/Sab se bade ladaiya re/Omkara hey Omkara...*, which, if translated into English, literary means that *Omkara* is the most powerful fighter in the land with such physical strength and metal abilities that he can smash anybody coming across his way. Another

important technical change is the absence of soliloquies in the film. While in the play Iago almost always justifies his actions in the soliloquies, in *Omkara* those sequences are usually covered by the facial and body movements of Langda Tyagi (the Iago figure) or are simply omitted because the narrative structure did not demand those.

Coming to another significant change, the handkerchief in *Othello* is substituted by a *kamarbandh*, a piece of traditional jewellery worn around the waist, which Omkara gives to Dolly as a token of love. This *kamarbandh*, dropped carelessly by Dolly and picked up by Langda Tyagi's wife, Indu, becomes the subject of contention as Langda uses it to plot against Omkara (since Omkara chooses Kesu over him to become his assistant), creating a rift between Omkara and Dolly. Here again, true to the Bollywoodish Masala style, two songs, *Beedi Jalaile* and *Naamak Issak ka* become very important. In the course of the first song, two very important events take place. The first is the introduction of the *kamarbandh*: in one frame Omkara and Dolly share intimate moments and Omkara gifts her the piece of jewellery. The second event takes place in another frame: when everybody is dancing to the song, Langda Tyagi challenges Kesu (Cassio) to have alcohol. Like in the original plot, this is a part of Langda Tyagi's plan to demean Kesu in the eyes of Omkara in order to take revenge. In the other song, Billo (Bianca), the prospective bride of Kesu, is seen dancing wearing the *kamarbandh*. Omkara, on seeing this, is infuriated and finally starts doubting Dolly's fidelity. An important inclusion from the original play-text in this regard is the almost verbatim translation of Brabantio's words: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see/ She has deceived her father, and may thee" (I.iii.288-289) uttered by Vakeel Saheb (Dolly's father) in the film. This warning too in

the later part of the film plays a vital role in affecting Omkara's views about Dolly. Towards the fag end of the film, just before their marriage, he confesses to Indu (Emily) that he is constantly haunted by the words of Dolly's father.

Similarly, in *Maqbool* too, the song *Jhini Mini Jhini* is well-integrated into the narrative, anticipating the proceedings. The parallel frame captures two dance performances. *Maqbool* is present in both the frames. The frame in which Abba-ji is being lured by a dancer, *Maqbool* is informed by the two astrologer-policemen about a heinous crime committed by Abba-ji. Immediately, a tight shot captures *Maqbool*'s face and the change in his expression hints at a change in his mind. In the other frame, *Maqbool* catches Nimmi dancing. Nimmi then drags him to the dance floor and laments over her position as the mistress of Abba-ji. Immediately after this shot, Nimmi confronts *Maqbool* saying that his position too would be lost to Guddu, Abba-ji's prospective son-in-law. Thus, in a single frame, *Maqbool* derives two jolts which convince him about killing Abba-ji. Here also the sequence follows the original narrative but the only difference being in their execution owing to the change in the medium.

Thus, it can be seen how masterfully the original events of Shakespeare's plays have been transcribed in the filmic medium by Bhardwaj, using the rhetorical devices of the medium with great ingenuity without abandoning the richness and complexity of the original narratives. This tends to make us agree with Sen when he says that "Bhardwaj's two Shakespeare adaptations can safely be placed among the most significant films produced in India in recent years; equally, they are among those few global cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare that have successfully indigenized Shakespeare..." (241).

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