Asian Shakespeares on Screen: Two Films in Perspective, special issue, edited by Alexander C. Y. Huang, *Borrowers and Lenders* 4.2 (Spring/Summer 2009).

Indigenizing *Macbeth*: Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool*

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ABSTRACT

Vishal Bhardwaj, a filmmaker and composer of Bollywood scores, has achieved considerable popular and critical success worldwide with his two adaptations of Shakespeare, *Maqbool* (*Macbeth*) and *Omkara* (*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. With *Maqbool*, Bhardwaj creates a film that is unique among those few global cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare that have successfully indigenized *Macbeth* at the level of setting, plot, language, and generic conventions without diluting the complex issues raised by Shakespeare's play.

Vishal Bhardwaj, who began his career as a composer of Bollywood film scores, is now regarded as one of India's most innovative young directors.[1] Based on *Macbeth*, *Maqbool* is Bhardwaj's second film and his first adaptation of a Shakespearean play. Although it is set in the murky underworld of Bombay (Mumbai), features Bollywood actors, and draws freely upon the conventions of the Bollywood film, the film remains close to Shakespeare. In its extremely complex and successful reworking of *Macbeth* in a different medium (film), language (Hindi/Urdu), time and setting (present-day Bombay), Bhardwaj's adaptation is comparable to *Throne of Blood*, by Akira Kurosawa, who is one of Bhardwaj's favorite filmmakers.

India has a longstanding but, as of now, little-known tradition of adapting Shakespeare into film in its vernacular languages. The Bombay film industry grew out of the Parsi theater, whose repertoire included several Shakespeare plays that were indigenized to suit local performance traditions. This led to several film adaptations of Shakespeare in Hindi and Urdu by the erstwhile members of the Parsi theater in the early years of the twentieth century. After Indian independence in 1947, this tradition took a back seat, but the late 1990s saw a resurgence

of interest in Shakespeare adaptations, no doubt partly because of the success of English-language adaptations by Kenneth Branagh, Baz Luhrmann, and others. Bhardwaj's films ride on the crest of this new wave of film adaptations of Shakespeare in India. Bhardwaj himself has stated in an interview that he aimed to go beyond Indian audiences: as he says, he "wanted to touch a chord with international audiences, so there were many commercial considerations" in adapting Shakespeare (interview with Raja Sen, "Today *Othello*" 2006). In this, he has succeeded very well, indeed: *Maqbool* (2004), based on *Macbeth*, and *Omkara* (2006), based on *Othello*, are the first Indian film adaptations of Shakespeare to have gained international recognition; they have been screened at several international film festivals 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 Bombay (now called Mumbai).[2] Two corrupt policemen (the equivalent of the weird sisters) predict Maqbool's rise to power by means of horoscopes, which Maqbool manages to do by killing Abbaji (the Duncan figure), the head of a crime family who treats Maqbool as if he were his own son. Additionally, Maqbool is deeply in love with Abbaji's mistress, Nimmi, who successfully instigates Maqbool to kill Abbaji after the latter gives the hand of his daughter, Sameera, to Guddu (Fleance), the son of one of his lieutenants, Kaka (Banquo). The policemen predict that Maqbool will be safe as long as the sea does not enter his house, but this is what happens, so to speak, as customs agents foil a vital smuggling deal at the port and raid Maqbool's home with the intention of arresting him. Instead, the customs agents find the dead body of Nimmi, who has, in the meanwhile, given birth to a child; whether it is Abbaji's or Maqbool's remains uncertain. When Maqbool, attempting to take his newborn son and flee the country, sees the child being taken care of by Guddu and Sameera at the hospital, he decides not to continue this life of violence and vengeance. Instead, as he emerges from the hospital, he is killed by Boti, another gangster who has joined with Guddu against Maqbool as their common enemy. In the memorable final shot, Maqbool's dying impressions are conveyed by a gradually reddening screen, as noises of commotion gradually fade into nothingness.[3]

Critical reception of the film has ranged from qualified admiration to generous enthusiasm. Poonam Trivedi (2007) and Douglas Lanier (2007) have found qualities in this adaptation of *Macbeth* that make it stand out among the film adaptations of Shakespeare's play — its economy of narration, its focus on the Abbaji-Maqbool (i.e., Duncan-Macbeth) relationship that makes Abbaji's murder even more loaded than would be the case if Abbaji were not a father-figure to Maqbool, its ingenious recasting of the weird sisters as a pair of corrupt policemen having connections with the underworld, and, perhaps most significantly, the recasting of the love between Maqbool and Nimmi (Macbeth and Lady Macbeth) as a forbidden romance. Indeed, Maqbool, Abbaji, Nimmi, and the others are all caught in a web of ambition, as well as of sexual

desire. Maqbool is driven to kill Abbaji as much by his love for Nimmi as by his resentment at the idea of having to serve under Guddu, who would become the heir to Abbaji's gang through his marriage to Sameera. Such complex motivation leads to Maqbool's murder of Abbaji on the night before Guddu and Sameera's wedding. On the other hand, Nimmi's hatred of Abbaji is triggered by their age difference — Abbaji is old enough to be her father, and she feels repelled by his appearance — and also because Abbaji has acquired a new mistress. Furthermore, Maqbool is strengthened in his resolve to kill Abbaji once he learns from the corrupt policemen that in all likelihood, Abbaji himself killed his mentor in order to head the gang. Consequently, after Abbaji himself is murdered, there is little doubt in anyone's mind that Maqbool is the killer, and the members of the gang soon regroup, isolating Maqbool in the process.

The murder of Abbaji more than halfway after the film begins and the relatively quick move to the denouement have been seen by some as creating a structural imbalance (Rosenthal 2007, 123); but this can be understood as the consequence of the radical reworking of the relationships tying Abbaji, Nimmi, and Maqbool. In fact, as Lanier has observed, the second half of the film, following Abbaji's murder, "closely parallels *Macbeth* in plot, motifs, and character" (Lanier 2007, 217). Those who see *Maqbool* with Shakespeare in mind will note the ingenuity and thoroughness of Bhardwaj's adaptive approach. For example, the banquet scene 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 becomes visibly disturbed. Maqbool's fear of Kaka's gaze is tied to Abbaji's murder scene, in which Abbaji dies looking at Maqbool. His blood splashes over Nimmi, who like her Shakespearean counterpart, becomes increasingly obsessed with imaginary bloodstains. Another brilliant reworking is the recasting of Macbeth's downfall with the foiling, by the port authorities, of Maqbool's attempt to offload contraband and the subsequent raid of his home. The coming of the sea is the film's suggested parallel with Birnam Wood, a parallel that, given the setting in Bombay, would have had to be abandoned if any literal transposition had been attempted. Shakespeare's supernatural dimension is interestingly recast in metaphorical terms, even as the very real setting of crime and criminalized politics is conveyed through a realist idiom.[4]

Adapters of *Macbeth* have often reworked the play's ending. While some (such as William Davenant and Giuseppe Verdi) have emphasized a return from chaos to order, others (such as Roman Polanski and Eugène Ionesco) have depicted a cyclical pattern of violence. Bhardwaj, uniquely, treads a middle ground. On the one hand, he realizes the redemptive potential of the play not in a return, at a social level, from anarchy to order — the Bombay underworld remains corrupt and violent — but at a personal level: Nimmi's newborn child is taken care of by Guddu and Sameera in an act of humanity that transcends personal and gang rivalries. But even this

reading can be undermined by the film's repeated suggestion that the unkindest cut of all has always come from the most unexpected quarters — from Abbaji, who killed his mentor, to Maqbool, who kills the person who brought him up as a son.

Though *Maqbool* claims to be only a "loose adaptation" of *Macbeth* (Trivedi 2007, 153), the film actually employs a range of strategies to incorporate the Shakespearean text in interesting, visual ways. For instance, the day before Abbaji's murder, Maqbool is seen as cooking food for the guests in a huge cauldron as he plots the 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. At the same time, the scene also translates into cinematic terms the Shakespearean technique of mirroring an upheaval in the moral order by an unnatural upheaval in the natural order. Bombay mafia dons, the film suggests, constitute the true rulers of the state, with their strong behind the scenes presence in various aspects of life, from politics to the Bollywood film industry itself. Indeed, Abbaji makes Maqbool responsible for negotiating deals with Bollywood stars as a reward for his loyalty.

Given the increasing critical and academic focus on Bollywood and Hindi commercial films made in Bombay, Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* has often been read in terms of Bollywood conventions (which I discuss later). To do so exclusively, however, is to miss out on other aspects that are equally vital, such as the relationship of *Maqbool* to other Shakespeare adaptations, especially that of Kurosawa, whose *Throne of Blood* also radically relocates Shakespeare both in terms of setting and performance styles (*noh* and Samurai film), and to other Indian and international cinema (*The Godfather* [1972], *Léon* [*The Professional*]), and Bollywood gangster films such as *Satya* (Varma 1998) and *Company* [Varma 2002]), to which Bhardwaj makes sly intertextual allusions — a useful strategy for a director who wants to make his film accessible to a wide range of audiences. Bollywood conventions have themselves changed over time, and Bhardwaj is one among several filmmakers working in Bombay who have departed from the conventions of the formula Bollywood film of say, the 1970s and '80s.

The setting of *Maqbool* — the Bombay underworld — is sharply etched, and it plays a much more important role than the stock urban or (idealized) rural settings of many previous Bollywood films. Bhardwaj's attention to setting is accompanied by a focus on language: the characters in *Maqbool* use a spectrum of language, from Hindi slang and colloquialisms spoken in Bombay (popularly called "Mumbaiya Hindi") to Urdu, reflecting the fact that Bombay is

perhaps India's most cosmopolitan city, where people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds live and work together. There are visual images, too, that reinforce this cosmopolitanism, albeit in the seedy premises of the Bombay underworld: in the predominantly Muslim world of *Maqbool*, Muslims and Hindus cooperate with each other.[5] Such attention to detail is among the hallmarks of a small and experimental new group of Bollywood filmmakers who have departed, at least in part, from the conventions of mainstream Bollywood films. One such director, Ram Gopal Varma, in films such as *Satya* (1998) and *Company* (2002), provides critiques of urban corruption, just as *Maqbool*, while remaining an adaptation of *Macbeth*, also does. In fact, one of Bhardwaj's greatest strengths is his ability to successfully indigenize Shakespeare at the level of setting, plot, language, and generic conventions without diluting the complex issues raised by Shakespeare's play.

Bhardwaj's use of some Bollywood conventions in *Maqbool* may be as much a matter of choice as of compulsion. The presence of Bollywood trademarks such as "family scenes of festivity and weddings, catchy music, dances, and songs" (Trivedi 2007, 153-54), including an "item number,"[6] is all the more strange for a filmmaker who has dismissed mainstream Bollywood as kitschy (interview with Raja Sen, "Today *Othello*" 2006). In a globalized world 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, it is impossible for a filmmaker making films in Hindi to escape from the hegemony of Bollywood itself. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha has observed,

> 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 . . . (, 29; italics in original)

Bhardwaj also betrays an uneasy relationship with his Shakespearean source, a possible reason for which is that, in the Indian context, cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare have fared better when their relationship with Shakespeare has gone unannounced.[7] Moreover, to adapt Shakespeare also means to risk comparison with other Shakespeare adaptations made all over the world for nearly a century, some of them acknowledged classics of cinema.

Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* has much to offer to those who are interested in transculturated Shakespeare. The ingenuity and thoroughness with which Bhardwaj and his scriptwriter Abbas Tyrewala relocate Shakespeare's play to an entirely new socio-cultural setting is without parallel among Shakespeare films (even Kurosawa set the film in Japan's historical past); but such

ingenuity is not the be-all and end-all of this film.[8] Bhardwaj is able to realize the tragic potential present in the sincere love between Maqbool and Nimmi (paradoxically a "forbidden" relationship); the scene in which Nimmi dies in the arms of Maqbool reaches an intensity that prepares the audience for the tragic ending. Bhardwaj's ability to achieve this without alienating purveyors of conventional Bollywood films is nothing short of astonishing. With his next adaptation of Shakespeare, *Omkara*, set in semi-rural Uttar Pradesh and dealing with issues of gender rather than of race or caste, Bhardwaj has shown that he can make a very different kind of Shakespeare film. One hopes that he goes on to make more. As of now, *Maqbool* can safely be placed among the most significant films produced in India in recent years; equally, it is among those few global cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare that have successfully indigenized Shakespeare without abandoning the richness and complexity of the original plays.

How to cite this article: Sen, Suddhaseel. "Indigenizing *Macbeth*: Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool*." In *Asian Shakespeares on Screen: Two Films in Perspective*. Special issue, edited by Alexander C. Y. Huang. *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* 4.2 (Spring/Summer 2009). Available online: http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/.

NOTES

1. Born in Bijnor, a small town in the state of Uttar Pradesh, Vishal Bhardwaj has directed only six films so far, to considerable acclaim. One of his earliest mentors was the writer-filmmaker Gulzar, who had made one of the most commercially successful adaptations of Shakespeare, *Angoor* (1981), which was based on *The Comedy of Errors*: they later collaborated on *Omkara* (2006). The director's last name can be spelled in two different ways. I use the spelling he currently uses (Bhardwaj) rather than the more common one (Bharadwaj).
2. Bhardwaj may have been influenced in his choice of setting by Ram Gopal Varma's gangster film, *Satya* ("The Truth," 1998), for which he had composed the score.
3. It has been suggested that the closing scene of *Maqbool* is "borrowed shot-for-shot from Luc Besson's *Léon* (1994)" (Jess-Cooke 2006, 178). Indeed, *Maqbool* can also be linked intertextually with Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), which also employs Shakespeare as an intertext (Jess-Cooke 2006, 177).
4. In his film, Bhardwaj recasts the role of prophecy considerably. When the policemen predict to Maqbool that he will become enmeshed in a love affair, he already knows that Nimmi is in love with him; their prediction that Maqbool will take over Abbaji's gang in a few months' time is likewise greeted by Maqbool with a smile. In most cases, their prophecies spell out what can already be understood, either in terms of individual motives or in terms of what the policemen call the restoration of balance in the universe.

5. Mukul Kesavan has argued that the use of Urdu in Bollywood film made possible the nostalgic evocation of the culture of the Urdu-speaking élite of India (1994, 251), an aristocratic culture that started crumbling with the arrival of British colonialism. Bhardwaj's film evokes this culture, but with a difference. The late 1990s, when Bollywood's connections with its criminal underworld, controlled mostly by Muslims, were exposed, provided a topically relevant setting for *Maqbool*, which alludes to both the past glory and current decadence of this culture. Does this make *Maqbool* one of those more recent Bollywood films that, according to Chadha and Kavoori (2008), present the Muslim as the demonized "Other" in Indian cinema? It is not an easy question to answer. On the one hand, the fact that Kaka and Boti, the only relatively loyal gangsters in the film, are also practically the only Hindus among the lot, does indeed suggest that an anti-Muslim subtext is at work. On the other hand, *Omkara*, set in an equally murky rural Uttar Pradesh, features only Hindu criminals. It could, therefore, be argued that the setting of *Maqbool* demands a new approach towards the depiction of the culture of the Urdu-speaking élite in Indian film, but it is a point that can, of course, be challenged.
6. These are "songs inserted into a film, primarily to titillate the audience" (Alter 2007, 134). The item number for *Omkara* has, in fact, achieved a popularity of its own.
7. The most commercially successful Hindi film based on Shakespeare, Gulzar's *Angoor*, does not state its relationship to *The Comedy of Errors*, though it has Shakespeare winking at the audience at the end of the film.
8. Repeated viewings of the film, in fact, reveal how carefully its parts hold together. For audiences that do not speak Hindi or Urdu, multiple viewings may, in fact, be necessary for a better understanding, given the complexity of the (reworked) plot and the swift pacing of the film.

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