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Maqbool and Bollywood Conventions

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Abstract

Vishal Bharadwaj sets *Maqbool* (Kaleidoscope Productions, 2004), his adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, against the backdrop of Mumbai's underworld. *Maqbool* deftly blends the basic plot structure of Shakespeare's play with the increasingly popular genre of Bollywood gangland films. Bharadwaj's adaptation traces the rise and betrayal of Miya Maqbool (Macbeth), whose love interest, Nimmi, combines the ferocity of Lady Macbeth with the desperation and marginalization characteristic of female leads in Bollywood thrillers. Bharadwaj's film belongs to a long tradition of Shakespeare adaptations in India, both on stage and the silver screen. Echoes of Shakespearean dialogues in Bharadwaj's film co-exist with staple Bollywood song and dance sequences, creating a heady postcolonial mix.

Maqbool, director Vishal Bharadwaj's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, opens with two corrupt cops, Purohit (Naseeruddin Shah) and Pandit (Om Puri), holed up inside a police van with a petty gangster, waiting for the midnight hour. In the eerie darkness, animated deliberations on the subtleties of police encounters alternate with interpretations of the city's astrological chart. While executing a hapless rival gang member, the cops inadvertently smear the misty horoscope of Mumbai with blood. The witches of Shakespeare's play, reincarnated as horoscope-touting policemen, prophesy the ascendancy over the city of gang lord Abbaji's lieutenant, Miya Maqbool. These opening shots firmly set in motion Bharadwaj's strategy in reconciling his Shakespearean material with the demands of a commercially viable Hindi film. *Maqbool* successfully fuses key aspects of Shakespeare's play with the theme of Mumbai's underworld made popular by Bollywood movies. The result is what Poonam Trivedi dubs a "cross-over" film — a hybrid entity that is imbricated in its postcolonial condition (2007, 153).

Maqbool joins a long tradition of Shakespeare appropriations on the Indian stage and screen. In the mid-nineteenth century, Shakespeare adaptations in India proliferated, largely from concerted efforts to introduce English education into the colony (Chakravarti, 41). Early indigenous

productions of Shakespeare's plays moved from free borrowings of plots to more "critical appropriations which countered colonial hegemony" (Trivedi 2005, 47). It would be wrong, however, to assume a monolithic Indian tradition of Shakespeare adaptations. Different regions came up with their own distinct productions, often incorporating pre-existing local performance practices. The influence of these indigenous theaters on screen adaptations of Shakespeare cannot be discounted. As Rajiva Verma points out, the Bombay film industry (Bollywood) turned to adaptations popularized by the Parsi theater while producing its own versions of Shakespeare (2005, 270). Verma goes on to speculate that the Parsi theater not only provided screenplays for films such as the 1927 production of *Dil Farosh* (*Merchant of Venice*), but also inspired the highly inflated rhetorical style that came to mark Bollywood Shakespeare productions. From the onset, most screen adaptations, much like the play scripts, transposed Shakespearean plots into Indian contexts and included the now indispensable song and dance sequences. Even more "authentic" productions, such as Nargis Art Concern's *Romeo and Juliet* (1947), modeled on MGM's 1936 version of *Romeo and Juliet*, retained the song sequences (Verma 2005, 271). Significantly, while *Macbeth* enjoyed a strong presence on the Indian stage (second only to *Othello*), the play remained largely ignored by the Bollywood film industry prior to *Maqbool* (Trivedi 2005, 48).

Much like the early films influenced by the Parsi tradition, *Maqbool* contains several song and dance episodes (though modest in number compared to standard Bollywood fare). Dialogues in *Maqbool* are a far cry, however, from the exaggerated rhetorical style of the 1940's and 50's. Instead, Bharadwaj's adaptation masterfully reworks Shakespeare's imagery to fit the muted, yet hard hitting depiction of Mumbai's gangland. As critics have noted, *Maqbool* fits in with the recent spate of Bollywood gangland movies, such as *Vaastav*, *Company*, and *Satya* (Trivedi 2007, 154). In its contemporary setting, *Maqbool* differs from Shakespeare appropriations such as the 1935 production of *Hamlet*, *Khoon ka Khoon*, which used primarily Victorian costumes and backdrops, or even *Throne of Blood*, which portrayed feudal Japan (Verma 2005, 271). Instead, *Maqbool* continues the trend set in 1981 by *Angoor* (*Comedy of Errors*), which transposed the bard's plot into modern India. Further, while literary scholars have in the past pondered the existence of Lady Macbeth's offspring, director Vishal Bharadwaj offers a tangible solution in his adaptation, which is discussed at length by William C. Ferleman's essay in this collection.

Set in Mumbai, *Maqbool* charts the rise and ultimate destruction of Miya Maqbool (Irfan Khan), the principal henchman of Abbaji, alias Jahangir Khan (Pankaj Kapoor). The confusion of moral order at the heart of the witches' chant in *Macbeth*'s opening act reverberates throughout the movie. Mumbai appears more in the clutches of gangsters rather than legitimate political authorities. The policemen Purohit and Pandit (literally meaning "priest" and "wise man") function

as supernatural agents obsessed with maintaining cosmic balance, as well as incompetent lackeys providing comic relief. Abbaji (literally "father"), the Duncan figure in *Maqbool*, differs vastly from the benevolent monarch in Shakespeare. On the night prior to the murder, Maqbool learns from the disgruntled cop, Purohit, that Abbaji had possibly murdered his predecessor to acquire control of the gang.

In the opening sequences, *Maqbool* closely follows its Shakespearean original. The astrologer-cops, alongside their prophecies, reveal the context of the recent troubles plaguing Mumbai's underworld. Abbaji's brother has been killed by a rival gang, spurring swift retribution. Maqbool exacts revenge on the perpetrators, just as Macbeth had succeeded in thwarting the Norwegian attacks. The victorious lieutenants Maqbool and Kaka (Banquo) retreat to the farmhouse to await further orders. There they encounter Pandit and Purohit, who regale Maqbool with the brilliant prospects guaranteed by his astrological chart:

Pandit: Your comet has entered the seventh position in your Venus chart. This position heralds your kingly reign. Forget Bollywood . . . In six months, Abbaji's throne is going to be Miyan's. King of Kings.

Purohit: Shut your trap, sonuvabitch . . . Shut up.

Maqbool: If I believed in any of this mumbo jumbo, Pandit, I would have sliced your tongue off right here.

Pandit predicts that Maqbool will soon control the gang's investments in Bollywood. Incredibly, the henchman overlooking Bollywood operations is soon revealed as a traitor, and Maqbool is appointed in his place. Kaka, his interest piqued, demands to know his fortune, as well. The cops skirt the question and instead, prophesy that Kaka's son, Guddu (Fleance) will be the antidote to Maqbool.

Apart from astrological mysteries, the scene at the farmhouse also reveals Maqbool's secret love for Abbaji's mistress, Nimmi (Tabu). Maqbool here resorts to the familiar fare of Bollywood *masala*, offering tangled love affairs and conflicting loyalties. Against the quotidian operations of the crime family, the film chronicles the hidden loves brewing in Abbaji's Mumbai stronghold. Maqbool and Nimmi's simmering passion for each other serves as a foil for the more rambunctious romance between Abbaji's daughter Sameera and Kakaji's son, Guddu. Bharadwaj replaces Duncan's two sons with the gang lord's rather naïve daughter. Later, Abbaji's acceptance of Guddu as his future son-in-law sets him up as the indisputable heir to the crime family, thereby threatening Maqbool's own ambitions.

Nimmi, Maqbool's sweetheart, embodies an interesting reworking of Lady Macbeth, blending more powerfully than most other characters the Shakespearean and Bollywood influences of the film. But unlike in the case of Lady Macbeth, ambition alone does not drive Nimmi. Abbaji's mistress shares much in common with the fallen women who emerge as love interests of rising gang lords in films such as *Dayavan* (1988) or *Vaastav* (1999). Of course, Nimmi — unlike the female leads of these popular gangster films — is not a common prostitute, though she undoubtedly shares their desperation and marginalization. At the engagement, amidst laughter and merriment, Guddu and Sameera feed each other. Abbaji's newest heart-throb, a Bollywood starlet, proceeds flirtatiously to offer him food. Abbaji makes clear his preference for the newcomer, signaling an imminent switch in mistresses. Nimmi, abandoned and forgotten, watches the couple from the sidelines. Yet for Nimmi, murdering Abbaji amounts to more than mere ambition or revenge. Instead, it translates into survival, a shot at a life with the man she loves — Maqbool. While Nimmi had resorted to insinuations earlier, she now explicitly goads Maqbool to murder. Wearing the sacrificial garland reserved for slaughtered goats, she exclaims:

Nimmi: It's time you sacrificed me, too. Jahangir has got a new mistress. How can I face going home? Everyone knows I'm Jahangir's mistress. He looks disgusting with his clothes off. Must be my father's age.

Maqbool: And he is my father. I've been brought up in this house.

Nimmi persists in her pleas for the murder. She informs Maqbool that he has to choose between two deaths — Abbaji's or her own. The murder therefore is triggered by ambition as well as love. Nimmi, like many Bollywood heroines, needs to be rescued, although in this film, she orchestrates her own release.

Once the pair tacitly agrees on the deed, Maqbool begins to hallucinate. He cries out to his aged servant demanding that the blood from the morning's slaughter be cleaned up, only to be told that the stains had been washed away hours ago. Nimmi, on the other hand, appears to be more impervious to the moral consequences of the impending act. At night, Maqbool enters Abbaji's bedroom as Nimmi lies vigilantly beside the sleeping gang lord. The single shot that kills Abbaji also smears Nimmi with blood. Trapped inside the mosquito net, she tries to brush away the blood-splatter — a gesture that would later become the hallmark of her madness. The murdering duo pin the blame on an inebriated guard.

Maqbool's subsequent inability to retain control over the underworld coincides with political upheavals plaguing the state. Mumbai's underworld, as well as its political leaders, appear to be

embroiled in a constant struggle for survival. Scenes in which a group of kidnapped politicians try to convince assembled journalists that they are in fact on vacation belong to the absurdist theater rather than to Shakespeare. *Maqbool's* destruction, much like the fall of Raghu in the Bollywood blockbuster *Vaastav*, results from the withdrawal of political patronage.

Maqbool succeeds in the domestic as well as the international markets precisely because the film melds the betrayal and chaos portrayed in Shakespeare with the murky, sinister Mumbai underworld. The film includes the love plots so essential to mainstream Bollywood movies; simultaneously, however, *Maqbool* opens up questions of corruption, terrorism, and communal harmony that have taken the center stage in recent Hindi films. In 2006, director Bharadwaj revisited gangland as the setting for yet another reworking of one of the Bard's plays in *Omkara* (*Othello*). William Shakespeare and the underworld evidently form a great mix — at least in Bollywood.

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