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"Mak[ing] . . . Strange / Even to the disposition that I owe": Vishal Bharadwaj's *Maqbool*

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Abstract

Shakespeare forms a kind of a benchmark in Indian culture; local responses to his works determine their distance from our own past. On stage, there have been several successful adaptations of *Macbeth* performed in indigenous Indian styles. But with *Maqbool*, we have hit another level of appropriation. Here, it is neither ethnicity nor authenticity that is aimed at, but rather, a postcolonial maturity in contemporizing the universality of Shakespeare according to our own current concerns. *Maqbool* has unfixed Shakespeare from the grip of the English medium school and made him a free-floating signifier available for anyone with the nous to take him on.

The opening sequence of the film *Maqbool*, Vishal Bharadwaj's Hindi adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (2004), begins with a conversation floating out of a rain-drenched van while a finger traces out a horoscope grid on the window pane. The ensuing dialogue, punctuated by throaty laughs, concerns the difficulties of staging an "encounter" and forecasting the future of Mumbai to determine whether Maqbool (Macbeth) was destined to reign over it. This beginning, like Shakespeare's in *Macbeth*, strikes the keynote of values reversed, treachery, and violence, but one localized in the dynamics and lingo of Mumbai's underworld. That this opening dialogue of the witches occurs between two policemen — a duo of clairvoyant comic cops who attempt to monitor and control the underworld through their compulsive drawing and divining of horoscopes — is startling and makes strange a well-known tale.

This recasting of the witches as a pair of conniving cops is the most original of the transpositions in the adaptation (there have been dozens of adaptations of *Macbeth* to gangland situations, but the witches have never before been visualized as policemen). It not only naturalizes and makes believable the unnatural and the supernatural, but also breaks the supernatural down

into a gamut of recognizable relations and inferences. And this comprises the larger achievement of *Maqbool*: providing a sharp, fresh take on *Macbeth* that continually surprises, not only through its acute social localization, oblique political comment, and its intertextual relations with other Bollywood films, but also through its cinematic "re-textualization" of Shakespeare's imagery.

The policemen/witches, Inspectors Pundit and Purohit, "juggle" and "equivocate" between don Abbuji's (Duncan's) men and the law: they act as go-betweens, privy to deals and payoffs. They chase, encounter, and interrogate, but fail to make the prisoners speak. They even seem to be hand in glove with the gangs, turning up in the nick of time to bail them out. In such bumbling attempts at duty, they are the scapegoat cops of every Bollywood film. But as conniving abettors and simultaneous upholders of the law, they provide an exposé of the nexus that has developed in the last decade or so between the police and the underworld in Mumbai, providing also a sly, searing glance at recent scams and prison escapes in India, in which it has been proven that the police have given a helping hand. As an interfering pair, the comic cops intersect with the vice/ devil, clown/fool tradition, acquiring as well shades of the Shakespearean wise fool. They take on some of the ribaldry and critiquing function of the Porter when they are caught by the camera pissing in unison into the night rain off the first floor balcony following a celebratory party ("drink, sir, is a great provoker of three things . . . nose-painting, sleep, and urine" [2.3.25, 28]).[1]

These cop-witches thus constitute the radicalism of the re-imagining of *Macbeth*, which hangs a new question on a canonical text: who are the witches/weird sisters, and what is their magic power? *Weird*, in Anglo-Saxon, meant not evil, but fate. Are the witches marginal people trying to assert power by "prophesying" or "equivocating" on both sides? In Shakespeare's play, the witches kill, avenge, trade in body parts, and lead Macbeth on. In the film, the cop duo promises much, but delivers little. Yet they justify all their actions through a grass-roots philosophy of maintaining a balance of power, a *shakti ka santulan*, by letting fire and water confront and confound one another: *Aag ko pani ka dar bahut bada hai*. They believe in letting the gangs fight it out among themselves, let dog eat dog. The ambiguities of the Shakespearean text are exploited, with suspense, in the film, so that by the end a suspicion begins to creep up the back of our minds that this prophesying, which instigates Maqbool's ambition and creates a power struggle, is merely a ploy, planted by the witches/police to seduce the chieftains/gangsters into liquidating each other. No less cannily than in the play, reality and unreality are juggled.

Localization in *Maqbool* receives another twist through its intertextualities with Bollywood traditions, making it a film that needs to be read as much from its spaces of discursive difference as from its Shakespearean center. The film locates itself in the popular genres of the Bollywood

gangster and city film, as well as in the Muslim social film; it is a direct inheritor of recent critiques of urban violence, such as *Satya* and *Company*, which generally are accepted as fictionalizations of real-life gangsters and masterminds of terror, such as Dawood Ibrahim and Chota Rajan, who exert a mafia-like hold on the people and institutions of Mumbai. The radicalism of *Maqbool* lies in its use of a Western canonical text to expose a festering urban and political culture. *Maqbool* and *Macbeth* are narratives of people who depend on bloodshed and violence for their living; who, to consolidate their positions, are sucked into treachery and revenge; and who end up eliminating each other. *Maqbool* positions women in a seductive, but ultimately destructive role, and though it valorizes violence as a livelihood, it ends by asserting the moral that violence does not pay.

In a literary film adaptation, retelling initiates its own alternative referentiality. With postmodernist "play" and self-reflexivity, *Maqbool* stretches its localization to dare to talk of its own lifeline (Bollywood), offering tongue-in-cheek jibes at the recent exposures of the notorious nexus between the underworld and the film industry in Mumbai. There are several references to Bollywood, all of which reveal it to be another field of action for the mafia, where the financing and fixing of films, like gold smuggling, illegal occupation, and contract killing, is admitted to be part of their *dhanda*, or business. In the one family scene of relaxation after dinner, the conversation turns to the fortunes of Bollywood; Kaka (Banquo) quips that Abbuji's life was worthy of being filmed and then goes on to brag that it will not auger well if this year they cannot get out a film with "Bhabhi" — i.e., Nimmi, the mistress of Abbuji who is also the Lady Macbeth figure. "Tell me, Bhabhi, which director do you want: Karan Johar, Ram Gopal Verma, Mani Ratnam?" he reels off grandiosely, offering her the pick of the actual best, only to be reduced to a stammer by an icy stare from Abbuji, who is definitely not pleased. The business or *dhanda* of Bollywood will not include the family because, as Maqbool has let drop earlier in the conversation in a kind of double irony, the gangsters believe that Bollywood is peopled by the cheap and vulgar kind — *ghatiya*. Another glance at the equation between the film world and the underworld is made through Inspector Pandit's observation that had Abbuji "not been in the underworld, he would have been in films; what an actor he is" after watching Abbuji enjoy a *nautch*, or dance performance, with some composure immediately after a strategically simulated emotional shakeup in which Abbuji is reminded of the police raid at his own wedding that left him bereft of his god-father figure. Again, this is something we suspect was stage-managed by Abbuji himself. Such seemingly casual self-references in the film are not simply narcissistic, however, but rather function as sharp critiques, tearing off the veil of make-believe that covers the underhand dealings of both the film and the extortion industry. They also establish a parallel between the king-making delusions of the underworld/Bollywood and the royalist ambitions in the theater of war in *Macbeth*, where "There's

no art / To find the mind's construction in the face" (1.4.11-12). Duncan's observation on the traitor Macdonwald self-reflexively exposes Abbuji, and by analogy, casts back a doubt on the Scottish king's manipulations.

More than the localization of plot and character, it is in the cinematic visualization of Shakespeare's imagery that a creative coalescence of the Shakespearean with the local occurs. Unusual placements of Shakespeare's images accost one at unexpected turns in the narrative, forcing at times a revelatory extension of meaning. These cinematic enactments are not intrusive — merely calling attention to themselves — but are instead integral to the new narrative while they resonate simultaneously with the old. A loud, raucous chatter of crows and other birds, for instance, visualizes Lady Macbeth's statement that "[t]he raven himself is hoarse / That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan / Under my battlements" (1.5.38-40) and forms the background "music" to Maqbool and Nimmi's first long scene by the roadside, where she plants the seeds of treachery in his mind. The cawing of crows, in fact, becomes a choric comment on all talk of murder: it accompanies the new ACP Devasare's questioning of the Inspector duo on his first day; it forms the background to Abbuji's questioning of the dead Moghul's son Boti (Macduff); and it chimes with Nimmi's aggressive stroking of the fires of ambition and eroticism in Maqbool.

The festivity of the engagement party celebrations takes the place of the banquet in honor of Duncan, in the backdrop of which Macbeth and Lady Macbeth plot his murder. A huge steaming cauldron, which in the play is full of "Double, double, toil and trouble" (4.1.10), is now glimpsed in the kebab makers' shop, where a rival gang gathers to plot further machinations of crime and revenge. The atmosphere of fear and terror unleashed by the usurper Macbeth, as reflected in the line "Each new morn, / New widows howl" (4.3.4-5), is represented graphically and aurally in Sameera's (Duncan's daughter's) wild scream of anguish and hate when Maqbool pretends to commiserate with her on the breakup of her engagement after Kaka's death and Guddu's (Fleance's) flight. The dagger soliloquy is encapsulated in a brief sequence in which Maqbool hallucinates that the blood of the goat butchered for the wedding feast has not been washed clean. The haunting of Banquo's ghost is given a fresh spin when Kaka's body is brought in, disrupting Abbuji's prayer meeting; as Maqbool touches the body in a pretended show of grief, the eyes of the dead body suddenly flip open, completely throwing Maqbool off his guard.

The most creative transposition and illustration, however, is of the central image of the play, in which "Pity, like a naked new-born babe, / . . . / Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye / That tears shall drown the wind" (1.7.21, 24-25). The naked babe is visualized in Nimmi's new-born son, who is seen being cradled lovingly by Guddu/Fleance and Sameera at the film's end, the very sight of which weakens Maqbool's blood-lust, blowing his horrid deeds into his own mind's eye, making

him drop his gun and walk out in a gesture of surrender, leaving the camera to mark a tear staining the glass visor through which Maqbool was looking at the babe. Pity, as the naked babe, remains an unborn child in the play *Macbeth*, emphasizing the sterility of the Macbeths. In *Maqbool*, its embedded meaning is released to force a final moment of anagnorisis, a self-realization of the futility of a life of bloodshed. Since in the film, the child is born of premature labor, it is also a visualization of the child who was "untimely ripp'd" from "his mother's womb" (5.8.16, 15). This figure, forecast as the one who will vanquish Macbeth, thus becomes the two-fold instrument of the reassertion of the good.

At the very end in the play, Macbeth's head is cut off and brought on stage, a sign of just deserts for the "butcher king." In the film, Maqbool walks out of the hospital, having dropped his guns, and is shot down by Macduff/Boti, who happens to see him outside. But no shriek or blood is shown; instead the camera pans, then tilts its line of vision to ground level, cuts to a view of the sky above, and finally cuts back to a close-up, framing only Maqbool's head as it falls and rolls on the ground. As the viewer looks from Maqbool/Macbeth's field of vision, spiritual music begins. There is then another cut. The camera swivels up to show a clear blue sky, rare in the film, heralding *Macbeth*'s closing sentiment that "the time is free" (5.9.21). Such cinematic visualizations create a "re-textualization" of the source text, adding to and releasing embedded meanings, almost as if the deferred possibilities of Derrida's *différance* were being caught.

The localization has a larger significance, too. Shakespeare forms a kind of a benchmark in Indian culture, so that local responses to his works determine their own distance from our past. On stage, there have been several successful adaptations of *Macbeth* performed in our own indigenous styles. But with *Maqbool*, we have reached another level of appropriation. Here, it is neither ethnicity nor authenticity that is aimed at, but rather, a postcolonial maturity in contemporizing the universality of Shakespeare into our own current concerns (Trivedi 2007). *Maqbool* re-writes Shakespeare in recognizably contemporary Indian terms. This third generational postcoloniality is reinforced through the persona of Vishal Bharadwaj, the director, scriptwriter, and music director of the film. A backwoods boy from the small town of Bijnor, UP, Bharadwaj, by the creativity shown in *Maqbool*, has released Shakespeare from the grip of the English medium school and made him a free-floating signifier available for anyone with the nous to take him on. The Indian people seem at last to have appropriated Shakespeare, like cricket, as an imperial icon and have done it well.

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Notes

1. All references to Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans et al., second edition (1997).

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