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What If Lady Macbeth Were Pregnant?: Amativeness, Procreation, and Future Dynasty in *Maqbool*

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Abstract

In *Maqbool*, Vishal Bhardwaj's unusually perceptive rewriting of *Macbeth*, an emphasis on Macbeth's future dynasty is rather conspicuously developed and reinforced (Trivedi 2007, 153). Murder and betrayal are not of much consequence in the modern Mumbai criminal underworld; these acts are quite simply part of the Mafia trade, and Macbeth/Maqbool is from the start an ignoble, cold-blooded murderer. It is love (or rather, sexual desire) and not treacherous murder that is the predominant transgression in *Maqbool*. The transgressive love affair between Macbeth/Maqbool and Lady Macbeth/Nimmi (including Nimmi's scandalous pregnancy) is developed as a key motif in the film. Maqbool seeks to combat the policemen's prophecy that Kaka's (Banquo's) children will attain political rule in the future. Maqbool fights for his own future dynasty and is not seriously concerned about his personal political rule within the Mumbai gang. The film concerns forbidden sexuality, procreation, and Maqbool's desperate but determined hope for a future dynasty.

Freud claimed that in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Macbeth is not grossly concerned about his personal political ambition; Macbeth is perhaps primarily preoccupied with his future dynasty. "Macbeth is incensed by this decree of destiny," Freud writes. "He is not content with the satisfaction of his own ambition, he desires to found a dynasty and not to have murdered for the benefit of strangers" (Freud 1991, 32). Freud's proposition that Macbeth acts mainly, but not exclusively, out of concern for his future dynasty is present in Shakespeare's play, albeit in rudimentary and marginal form. But in *Maqbool*, Vishal Bhardwaj's unusually perceptive and seminal retextualization of *Macbeth*, an emphasis on Macbeth's future dynasty is conspicuously developed and reinforced. Poonam Trivedi claims that the film is a "retextualization" because it not only augments Shakespeare's play by reimagining critical scenes, but also because the film,

though admittedly still an appropriation, sufficiently mimics or contains much of the mythos, character, and imagery of Shakespeare's play: "For what is strikingly significant about the film is how much of the original text is retained, and engaged with, within the adaptation, in terms of the plot, character, imagery and not just theme and atmosphere" (Trivedi 2007, 153). She points out that the film's retextualization comments on a "festering urban culture"; that the film too aligns itself with postmodernist, self-conscious filmic practice by alluding to the realities of Bollywood cinema and its ostensible nexus to the Mumbai criminal underworld; and, moreover, that the film aligns itself with the genres of both the "Bollywood gangster and the Muslim social film" (154).

Beyond these themes, I think, *Maqbool* develops a different dimension of *Macbeth* by positing a fecund, pregnant Lady Macbeth alongside the curious conception that Macbeth could probably, if ironically, be "selfless," insofar as he seeks to secure his future dynasty at his own peril. Murder and betrayal are not of much consequence in the Mumbai criminal underworld; these activities are simply part of the Mafia trade, and Maqbool is from the start an ignoble, cold-blooded murderer. Instead, sexual desire is the predominant transgression in *Maqbool*. The transgressive love affair between Macbeth/Maqbool and Lady Macbeth/Nimmi is set in relief as Maqbool seeks to combat the policemen's prophecy that Kaka's (Banquo's) children shall attain future political rule. Maqbool is not seriously concerned about his personal, self-centered leadership within the Mumbai gang; rather, he unconsciously fights to found his own future dynasty. *Maqbool* concerns forbidden sexuality, to be sure, but only as it refers to a necessary instance of procreation in order to effectuate Maqbool's desperate, but determined hope for a future dynasty.

This is evident in the first few scenes of *Maqbool*. Macbeth aspires to be prince; his energy is motivated by a specific occurrence of lust for political power; Maqbool's aspirations, however, are not centered on the political here and now, but on the policemen's prophecy concerning Kaka's future rise to political rule and prestige: that is, Kaka's future dynasty. The two policemen astrologers first note that Maqbool will rule the Mumbai gang, of which he is a part, as "King of Kings." But the crafty policemen later take care to warn Maqbool personally that he will reign as Mafia don for only six months. (Incidentally, this critical timeline is absent from Shakespeare's play.) The policemen unequivocally relate that Kaka and, in particular, Guddu, will attain power within the gang. The policemen state that Fleance/Guddu's astrological sign is auspicious: "He's the antidote to Miyan." Maqbool listens to the policemen's prophecy concerning his own political rise, but is not particularly interested; Maqbool apprehends such information incredulously. He claims that if one of the policemen told the truth, he would cut out his tongue. But when Maqbool learns from the oracular policemen that Kaka's line, and not his own, will produce future political dominance, he becomes inordinately concerned. A close-up of Maqbool's face appears; his eyes

give him away. Macbeth, however, acts differently when he learns from the three witches that Banquo will beget future kings. The Third Witch states to Banquo: "Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none" (1.3.65). Such intelligence notwithstanding, Macbeth becomes lustful about his imminent political rule, not his future dynasty. While Macbeth interprets the witches' prophecy as evidence of his future rise, Maqbool interprets the policemen's prophecy as evidence of his future demise. Therefore, Maqbool strives to conquer the prophecy of doom by narrowing his actions to matters of procreation and future dynasty.

This is best understood in the context of the interpolations concerning Lady Macbeth and Nimmi. Nimmi's subtle, but nonetheless aggressive, sexuality cannot be overstated — the figure of Nimmi (skillfully acted by Tabu) is extraordinarily comely, but also demanding and conniving. Nimmi's Lady Macbeth is indebted to Sarah Siddons's conception of the role and holds "all the charms and graces of personal beauty" (Wilders 2004, 21). The lover of a Mumbai underworld don, Nimmi cunningly tempts Maqbool into an illicit and amorous love affair, the result of which is her pregnancy. In one memorable scene, Nimmi manipulatively states to Maqbool, "There are 12 moles on my body. Do you want to count them?" In her first scene with Maqbool, Nimmi voices a similarly lubricious, enticing line: "Is that all you're thirsty for?" In Shakespeare (and in Polanski) Macbeth indeed "murdered himself when he murdered Duncan" (Rothwell 2000, 156); in the film, Maqbool murders himself when he agrees to "fall" in love with Nimmi. Maqbool fails to pay heed to the don's wise advice: "Love is a disease." The Macbeths are, ironically, a rather tranquil and committed couple. They quarrel briefly; only the implication exists that Lady Macbeth has a defined sexual authority over Macbeth. *Maqbool* is quite another matter. The film centers its attention on courtship: Maqbool is unmarried and ostensibly uninterested in women; he must be seduced into a transgressive affair by Nimmi. Their relationship is unstable because Maqbool is understandably reluctant to love Nimmi, the don's mistress, and because he suspects that Nimmi will perform a substantive role in his destruction.

Macbeth is probably the Shakespearean character with the most vivid imagination; his fantasy-making is, in fact, responsible for his fate (Bloom 1991, 1). Macbeth's vision concerns the transgressive murder of Duncan. Maqbool, on the other hand, is enslaved to his erotic dreams. Maqbool imagines the don and Nimmi making love and is noticeably haunted by the fantasy. He has disturbing visions of the don kissing Nimmi's feet and sensually touching her fine, dark, long hair. These dreams directly relate to human procreation and also dynasty. Maqbool's dreams or images, ironically, are neither unreal nor unnatural: they betray actual, if unseen, events in the film. In one scene, Nimmi points a gun at Maqbool and compels him to profess his love for her. This phantasmagoria is a retextualization of Macbeth's dreadful dagger scene; in *Maqbool*, however,

a gun replaces the dagger, and Nimmi wields the gun. Nimmi fires the gun and misses slightly, nearly killing Maqbool. This dream sequence insinuates that Nimmi will lead to Maqbool's death. Maqbool therefore has every reason to fear Nimmi. Like Roman Polanski's use of Shakespeare's metaphor of the "caged bear," in which the bear is, partially, "an ironic reminder that Macbeth will become his own trapped animal" (Crowl 2008, 148), the loaded gun in Nimmi's hand speaks to Maqbool's helplessness relative to the intimate, intimidating presence of Nimmi's seductive sexuality. Nimmi's power in this scene is intense; however, it is also considerably volatile and deranged, suggesting her own death. (She will perish due to a combination of giving birth and guilt, but she does not commit suicide.) Nimmi's sexuality intimates that she is fertile and will soon become pregnant; the gun emblemizes her sexual power over Maqbool, the gun/dagger being pure, ironic phallic symbolism (Donaldson 1998, 103). In contrast to Lady Macbeth's willed barrenness ("Stop up th'access and passage to remorse" [1.5.42]), Nimmi is remarkably fecund (on this topic, see Adelman 1992, 135). This scene epitomizes sexual duality and, then, the motif of human procreation. Nimmi hands the gun back to Maqbool; Maqbool batters her and calls her a "whore." In so doing, Maqbool cedes to Nimmi a singular, sexual power over him. Thereafter Nimmi and Maqbool embrace, with a picturesque "body" of water in the background.

Maqbool admirably exploits two critical episodes in *Macbeth* to underscore the themes of sexuality and procreation. On the subject of Lady Macbeth's imagined infanticide, Macbeth responds: "Bring forth men-children only, / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males" (1.7.72-74). Nimmi embodies this romanticized image of the masculine-maternal breeder, becoming pregnant and fulfilling Macbeth/Maqbool's dynastic aim: "to have children himself, children who can succeed him" (Freud 1991, 32). The film anatomizes a maternal Lady Macbeth as Nimmi produces Maqbool's heir. One may refer to Nietzsche's Zarathustra on the subject of the production of the male warrior: "Man should be trained for war and woman for the recreation of the warrior: all else is folly" (Nietzsche 1969, 91). To be sure, Nimmi's prime role as a woman is to produce, via pregnancy, Maqbool's "warrior" heir. She threatens to abort Maqbool's child, but refrains from doing so; rather, Maqbool is the babe who is annihilated: he is rendered "selfless." Maqbool recognizes that as a new era dawns, he will be assassinated just as the don was assassinated. His rule reaches its nadir as he becomes painfully aware that Macduff/Boti will murder him. Maqbool does not attempt to quarrel with Boti when Maqbool leaves the hospital after visiting his baby son. Maqbool willingly dies, unlike the unyielding Macbeth, in accord with that truthful part of the policemen's prophecy, that his rule will be limited to six months. But Maqbool successfully produces a male heir who could frustrate Guddu's leadership. The policemen's prophecy is incomplete: the tricky, quizzical coppers, who are "both corrupt and

bumbling," neglect to mention Maqbool's male heir and his future dynasty in their prophecy; their objective is to maintain a balance of power in Mumbai and "seduce the chieftains/gangsters into liquidating each other" (Trivedi 2007, 157). Maqbool's son — assuredly not the embodiment of the "good" — is set to become another future Mumbai gangland murderer — indeed, his proper, bloodthirsty heir.

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