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From Ethnographic Impulses to Apocalyptic Endings: Bharadwaj's *Maqbool* and Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* in Comparative Context

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Abstract

Maqbool's critical success, which was followed by director Vishal Bharadwaj's even more commercially successful adaptation of *Othello*, entitled *Omkara* (2006), raises interesting questions about the appropriation of Shakespeare in post-millennium India. What does a Shakespearean tragedy offer to the director and audiences in the (post) post-colonial environment of contemporary India? This essay examines the relationship between Vishal Bharadwaj's *Maqbool* and Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*, addressing their mutual ethnographic impulses and apocalyptic endings.

With its Indian release in 2004, director Vishal Bharadwaj's adaptation of *Macbeth*, entitled *Maqbool*, came as a surprise to critics and audiences. Although India has a long history of Shakespeare adaptation in theater and film, there had been no acknowledged Shakespeare adaptation in popular Hindi cinema in almost fifty years.[1] Given the dearth of Shakespeare adaptations in a film industry that otherwise abounds in unacknowledged adaptations and complex appropriations, critics and audiences expressed happy surprise with *Maqbool*'s release. Deepa Karmalkar's reaction in *Screen*, a weekly popular film magazine, is representative of its critical reception: "Credit is due to maker Vishal Bharadwaj for suddenly reviving Shakespearean literature" (Karmalkar 2006). Bharadwaj's revival of Shakespeare relocates *Macbeth*'s Scotland, that "othered" geography in relation to England, into the contemporary, Mumbai underworld (formerly known by its colonial name of Bombay). In a geographical shift from Shakespeare's play, in which "Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against" Macbeth

(*Macbeth*, 4.1.109-10),[2] Mumbai's sea closes in as his gang brothers, police, politicians, and rivals all threaten Maqbool's usurped fiefdom when a smuggling deal for an unnamed package goes wrong. Like many contemporary film adaptations of Shakespeare, *Maqbool* uses no Shakespearean language. Instead, regionalized Urdu, which requires a bit of effort from Hindi viewers, marks the characters' Muslim identity and social world. The film is filled with Islamic signifiers, ranging from clothing and eating and fasting practices to a dramatized trip to a *darga*, or Sufi temple, which includes a religious musical sequence. Bharadwaj's adaptation of *Macbeth* then is contemporized, indigenized, and Islamified,[3] marking it as outside the dominant culture and re-coded through the traditions of the Western mafia film and its influence on Indian gang film.

Bharadwaj's success raises interesting questions about the appropriation of Shakespeare in post-millennium India. What does a Shakespearean tragedy offer to the director and audiences in the (post) post-colonial environment of contemporary India? The popularity of "writing back" theories (Ashcroft et al., 2002) in postcolonial discourse makes it tempting to think of *Maqbool* as a response to a legacy of colonization and enforced bardolatry. Poonam Trivedi writes that with Shakespeare, as with cricket, Indian cinema has "appropriated another imperial icon" and done it well (2007, 157). This is true, but does not take into account the fact that Bharadwaj came to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* not through a colonial canon or global imperialism, but through Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa. In an interview, Bharadwaj explains:

> A very dear friend had given me Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* to watch. That was when I got a glimpse of the power of Shakespeare's writing (and Kurosawa's cinematic interpretation, equally powerfully). Later I went deeper into the story of *Macbeth* with my underworld framework in mind and was absolutely charmed by what the *Macbeth* metaphor could do in terms of power and depth to the story. . . (Bharadwaj 2003, 47)

Maqbool's kinship to *Macbeth* then is mediated through its relationship with *Throne of Blood* (1957), thus triangulating the texts and necessarily complicating *Maqbool*'s use of *Macbeth*. A west-to-east-to-east transmission requires that the discourse about trans-cultural Shakespeare adaptations move beyond Shakespeare's universality, colonial importation, or accusations of plagiarism (which are often directed towards popular Indian cinema). Shakespeare film adaptations are unique because, as José Angel Garcia Landa explains, they have "multiple intertextual dimensions, connecting them — unlike most adaptations, or remakes — to the original text, to previous films of the same play and to stage productions, which in turn have an intertextual history of their own" (2005, 185). Kurosawa's influence on *Maqbool* cannot be underestimated and yet, like the majority of adaptations, *Maqbool* is not merely an Indian replication of *Throne*

of Blood or *Macbeth*. Instead, Linda Hutcheon's definition of adaptation as "repetition but without replication" (2006, 173) suggests how *Maqbool* can be a unique and historically specific product of Kurosawa and Shakespeare, and of international literary and film histories.

Throne of Blood and the Ethnographic Impulse

Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* adapts Shakespeare's medieval Scotland to feudal Japan during the Sengoku period (1477-1573), which was "marked by internecine wars among rival clans . . . [when] warlords violently seized domains . . . and were killed in turn by their vassals" (Price 2003). Relocated in time, space, and culture, *Throne of Blood* follows the main characters and plot lines of *Macbeth*, with significant additions, including *noh* performance styles — a choice that at first baffled critics, but later was hailed as an ingenious reworking of one cultural history into another. These filmed theater details include using the bare stage as a set, employing a chorus and traditional *noh* music on the film soundtrack, and actors' stylized mannerisms and facial expressions based on masks. It bears mentioning that *noh* was already an outmoded style of theater for Kurosawa's contemporary audience. As critics have noted, in the shadow of World War II this revitalization through *Macbeth* offered Kurosawa a stage on which to record *noh* theater tradition, a move toward ethnography and preservation in the contemporary medium of film.

Throne of Blood has been regarded as a conglomerate of disparate cultural practices, which "allows Kurosawa to interrogate both Japanese and Western cultural traditions through his manipulation of *Macbeth*, Japanese theater, and contemporary film conventions" (Suzuki 2006, 94). *Throne of Blood* and *Maqbool* share a number of similarities, including the indigenization of most of *Macbeth*'s plot, characters, and themes, the omission of the original language for a stylized dialect, the intensified kinship relationships appropriate to the feudal contexts of the play (the Sengoku period in Japan and a Mumbai criminal world of the mafia patriarch), the insertion of an impossible heir for the Macbeth couples, and apocalyptic endings that refute the play's claim of rightful order restored.

Maqbool channels *Macbeth* via *Throne of Blood* to stage a specific historic negotiation and representation of minority Islamic culture within India, as Hindu fundamentalism threatens to overrun the once diverse city of Mumbai. This, of course, is taking place during a period of rapid economic and social change, labeled as globalization, which arguably resembles the post-war period in Japan and is recorded through the filmed narrative of the Shakespearean tragedy that blends multiple mediums. Film scholar Moinak Biswas hypothesizes that the genre of the Shakespearean tragedy, unlike other contemporary media, including the realist film, provides the structure and distance to mourn the loss of the recent past due to the homogenizing effects

of globalization (2006). In contrast to the stereotypical "Bollywood" family romance for which Indian cinema recently has become famous and in which "the current imagination of the family drama has a manic investment in erasing all ideological fissures from its domain" (Biswas, 2006), *Maqbool*, and later *Omkara*, are set within those fissures — the lives of people from minority, non-mainstream cultures.

When *Maqbool*'s relationship to *Throne of Blood* is highlighted, Bharadwaj's attention to Islamic costuming, accent, food, architecture, and religious and social customs suggests a nostalgic ethnography of a waning Muslim milieu that is comparable to Kurosawa's post-war chronicling of *noh* theater traditions specifically and a period of Japanese Samurai history generally. Bharadwaj, through Kurosawa's mixed genres of tragedy and ethnography, creates a tragic ethnography to memorialize Mumbai as a city with threatened shores.

Throne of Blood and *Maqbool*'s endings are apocalyptic, refusing, like *Macbeth*, "to give us the play's reassuring conclusion . . . in which a just political authority triumphs" (Price, 2003). The Macbeth couples are destroyed, the men being effectively, if not literally, beheaded. But both films leave lurking at the gates an unspoken danger greater than Macbeth, with his quite human motives and machinations. In *Throne of Blood*, that threat is an approaching army that remains off-screen. Significantly, *Throne of Blood* opens and closes with a single stone marker shrouded by fog and a disembodied chorus suggesting wide-scale massacre. Stephen Price writes, "Kurosawa gives us battles filtered through his perceptions as a twentieth-century artist well acquainted with the large-scale slaughters of his own time. The sense of apocalypse in the films is not of the sixteenth century, but of now" (2003). While contemporized, *Maqbool*'s ending is also bleak even though an heir, albeit of questionable paternity, appears to survive after Maqbool's death.

The appearance of a potential child for the infamously childless Macbeths is perhaps *Throne of Blood*'s strongest influence on *Maqbool*, a deviation not seen in other *Macbeth* adaptations. Bharadwaj elaborates upon Kurosawa's pregnant Lady Macbeth character, Asaji, who announces her pregnancy opportunely to manipulate further Washizu/Macbeth. While in *Throne of Blood* the child does not survive, Maqbool's premature son's future, as well as his paternity, remain uncertain. The choice to replicate and build upon the pregnancy trope connects the two films intimately, while distinguishing *Maqbool* from other *Macbeth* adaptations. The film-to-film reference links the two directors and places Bharadwaj, by association, into both the international art film canon and the Shakespeare-on-film canon. At the same time, the affiliation with *Throne of Blood* and Bharadwaj's public statements disassociate *Maqbool* from Bollywood clichés, specifically from those concerning Indian cinema's inferiority within the international film canon.[4]

However, even with the presence of a potential heir, in neither film is there a restoration of rightful power. Sameera and Guddu, the designated heirs of Abbuji's kingdom, are the children of killers who survive upon a blood market. Those intercepted smuggled goods that instigate Maqbool's final fall need not be named in the Indian context; viewers are well aware of the weapons smuggled into cities before carefully planned "spontaneous" communal riots, while fears of a "suitcase" nuclear bomb within Mumbai are not irrational, as the November 2008 bombings sadly demonstrated. Given this apocalyptic vision of Mumbai's future, Vishal Bharadwaj's desire to create a record of the recent past and to mourn the demise of a heterogeneous city and time by harnessing Shakespeare and Kurosawa's powers is an understandable project.

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Notes

1. In my own research at the National Film Archives of India, I counted eleven Indian film adaptations of Shakespeare, including a shot-by-shot adaptation of Lawrence Olivier's *Hamlet*, acted and produced by Indians between 1927 and 1954. However, from 1954-1998, only one popular Hindi film — *Angoor* (1982), a loose adaptation of *A Comedy of Errors* — was released. Jayaraj's Malayalam adaptation of *Othello*, *Kaliyattam*, was released in 1997. Instead of an acknowledgment of its source text in the credits, *Angoor* provides as acknowledgment a literal wink from a Shakespeare image. The question of what constitutes an adaptation remains under debate. For the purposes of this essay, I suggest that an adaptation is a sustained engagement with the source text, in contrast to brief Shakespeare references within Indian films.
2. All references to *Macbeth* are from the edition of Robert Miola (Shakespeare 2003).
3. Mukul Kesavan identifies the Islamicate roots of popular Hindi cinema. The neologism "Islamicate" refers "not directly to the religion Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims" (Kesavan 1994, 246).
4. For a detailed discussion of the significance of the infant in *Throne of Blood* and *Maqbool*, please see "Shakespeare Adaptation in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: Pregnancy, Adaptation

and Illegitimacy in *Maqbool*," in Blair Orfall, "Bollywood Retakes: Literary Adaptation and Appropriation in Contemporary Hindi Cinema" (2009).

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