

The Socio-Political Worlds of Macbeths: A Study of Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* and Vishal Bharadwaj's *Maqbool*

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Abstract

Filmmaking, adaptations, auteur director have now become as old as pop or Elvisian craze. But craziness, frenzy and trance are indivisible elements of human nature. Eugene O' Neill's craze for recognition in a post-capitalist world where Yank seeks "belongingness" in vain in *The Hairy Ape* is a vestibular connection to the frenzy in Shakespeare's *Henry VI: the "left out"*; and the "nothing remains." Shakespearean characters have often been subject to psychotic behaviours. Such manic phases of Shakespearean characters reflect the madness theory whereby people would do anything to fit in. With such shields of madness, they try to understand the socio-politics of the world.

Film adaptation faces challenges of misinterpretations just like in theatrical adaptations as has been stated by G.P. Deshpande, due to *ananthapath*(multiple readings) and *ananthapathak* (multiple readers), in "An Affair to Remember". It is seen that an adapted movie like a drama is 'dwija' or twice born and is read first; performed later. This paper intends to study the socio-politics of the adapted and adopted worlds of the new Macbeths in cinema as represented by Akira Kurosawa in the Japanese adaptation of Macbeth as *Throne of Blood* and Vishal Bharadwaj in his Indian adaptation of the metatext as *Maqbool*.

Keywords: socio-politics, adaptation, psychosis, resistance

When Kurosawa's *Kumonosu-Jo* (*Throne of Blood*) was first released in the western world it created a furore as the film critic regarded the film against Shakespeare. But it was the 1st December 1961 issue of Time Magazine that changed forever the reception of the film by regarding the film as a "masterpiece" and the "finest of Shakespeare movies". Kurosawa not only adapted but also translated Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606) rendering it a Japanese look so that his audience could easily relate themselves to the film. There is hardly any relevance of Scottish lords and their feudal wars in an Indian context or a Japanese context. Unless the director can make his audience feel at "home" with his film, it can never be an autonomous work of art or a blockbuster hit. This is what exactly both Akira Kurosawa and Vishal Bharadwaj did while adapting Shakespeare.

“Psychosis is a loss of contact with reality, typically including delusions (false ideas about what is taking place or who you are) and hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that aren't there).” (“What is Psychosis?”, Marcia Purse). Shakespearean characters have often been subject to bipolar I disorder (Hamlet sees himself in Claudius), schizophrenia (Lady Macbeth), Post-traumatic stress disorder (Macbeth’s behaviour on seeing Banquo’s ghost). Such manic phases of Shakespearean characters reflect the madness theory whereby people would do anything to fit in. *Kumonosu-Jo* (The Castle of the Spider's Web) (*Throne of Blood*) by Akira Kurosawa relocates Macbeth to feudal Japan. Here, Kurosawa substitutes the Scottish mediaeval setting of the play with events from the Japanese civil war era. Like Thane of Glamis, Macbeth fought under King Duncan at a time when warring rival kings and their clans fought for hegemony in a social, political and military landscape via force of arms, which clearly resembles the feudal civil war system of the samurai warrior culture. Macbeth's iconic opening scene has three witches singing magical rhymes. The ritualistic elements are incorporated from the very beginning of Kurosawa's film as it plays a significant role in translating the play into a foreign culture and into the medium of film. There is Noh music playing in the background and then there is a misty landscape with only a wooden monolith memorialising the site of the once 'strong stronghold' of 'Spiderweb Castle' and the chanting chorus. As the obscuring slurry shows a mighty fortress, several terrifying messengers announce a rebellious assault on their fortresses to Tsuzuki (King Duncan), Spiderweb castle lord and his council. Tsuzuki learns, as it flips the tide of wars against the insurgents, Washizu (Macbeth) and Miki (Banquo) needs to award them with pleasure on their arrival. The camera reveals that Washizu and Miki are only accessible through the Spiderweb Trees, towards Spiderweb Castle. We could see them staying on their horses in forest in the middle of a peculiar combination of lightning, storms and huge sun-light, flowing through the foliage of trees before Washizu and Miki, their greatest delight in the form of an androgynous bad spirit, and Washizu declaring:

“What weather!

I have never seen anything like it”

- the equivalent of Macbeth’s speech:

“So fair and foul a day /I have not seen”.

In the original *Macbeth* we find three weird sisters prophesising the fates of Macbeth and Banquo in the heath but in Kurosawa’s *Macbeth* there is this androgynous evil spirit who is shown spinning in a hut the destiny of Washizu and Miki/Banquo. It’s here that the seed of ambition and crime is first sown in the mind of Washizu. Asaji, the counterpart of Lady Macbeth is equally malevolent. She is the one motivates by her words to murder Tsuzuki. Washizu is obviously optimistic and does not deny looking for power. He is glad to be a lord for Spider's Web Castle and its surroundings, but he is forced to the limit by his wife Asaji to convince him to destroy adversaries and allies to achieve additional strength. She encounters both rational and emotional counterfeit-ness with his inherent resistance— but reminds him how his predecessor was assassinated, and then advises him that a potential child he needs to prepare for. Poor Washizu's actions are not regulated. Even the predominant weather opposites him, all of it adds up to the iconic conclusion where Washizu occupies the display with thousands of arrows, if he behaves by himself or for the sake of his wife.

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Unlike the famous banquet scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, where Macbeth's hallucination is portrayed introducing the ghost of Banquo, here Kurosawa adds a song and dance performance by one of the ministers of Washizu's court. The old man sings:

Oh terrible Gods
Attend our story well, the very same tale
Foretold in ancient legends, the warrior (who)
Served his traitorous schemes....

Their debt of royal treachery swiftly brings their own ruin. (*Throne of Blood*)

It is at this juncture that Washizu visualizes the ghost of Miki attending the feast. Washizu throws away his saucer of soup and shouts like a mad man combating the ghost at times and shouting "slay you yet again". Asaji's swiftness can be seen here. She immediately covers the eye of the camera, takes control of the minds of the ministers, and presents saying lord Asaji is sad at the death of Tsuzuki which has prompted him to behave in this manner and asks everyone to retire from the feast. Asaji's character is shown as strong and highly manipulative in comparison to Washizu. But Asaji too undergoes a change where we find her overburdened with the sense of guilt and blood spilt just like Shakespeare's original work. But Kurosawa makes it more dramatic and thereby creating his original masterpiece. Asaji's blood and water are hallucinated by an empty container she used to wash it away, instead of cleaning her hands. This clearly demonstrates that Asaji left her thoughts as well as sensations for a world of complete obscurity, guilt and psychosis. The character of Lady Asaji also made it clearer than that of Macbeth that Washizu surrendered because it seemed to be malicious from the beginning. She was expected to be a Japanese noble woman at the time, yet her mannerisms had a characteristic of her role later on in the film. She spoke similarly in logical voices, manipulating Washizu's will even more directly than she had been influenced by Lady Macbeth. Asaji was very brutally honest and precise, where Lady Macbeth was dramatic, which actually contained the flaw of the character of Macbeth, that Shakespeare tried to portray. In the beginning of the movie however, Washizu's being lost in the mist among heaps of skulls of soldiers with guns had given the audience a waking call about the kind of psychotic behaviour that was to grasp each and every character later onwards. Remembering the year of release, it is exactly the state of panic each Japanese individual had to feel, as the state machinery collapsed owing to the bliss of the Second World War at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After every state's doom, the fear is automatically transferred upon its individuals. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, is probably, at least to the viewers cum scholars, every individual of post-war Japan till the 1970s.

On the other hand, the Indianized version of *Macbeth*, *Maqbool* is set in Bombay's underworld. The setting of the film in Bombay's underworld hits at the point of relevancy. How and in which way can we the Indians relate to Shakespeare's work which is set in at far off Scotland that too in 16th century. In this 21st century theme and story of Macbeth plays a vital role amongst the underworld people. Where one criminal gang tries to take over the other gang through bloodshed. Films like *Vastaav* and others have shown this very vividly. But Bharadwaj differs from them in the sense that he not only shows through *Maqbool* the gang wars of the Mumbai underworld but has also tried to show the roles that women play in this world and their mental balances as well as imbalances.

Vishal Bharadwaj, though calling this story his own, fabricates a patriarch character, Abbaji, an influential underworld don who embraces *Maqbool* and brings him up like his own son.

Maqbool is devoted to Abbaji and thankful and serves as his most trusted guy. The instructions of King Duncan / Abbaji are accomplished by Maqbool. The main divergence from Shakespeare's text arrives now. Nimmi / Lady Macbeth, in this scenario, is the mistress of Abbaji, who is both honest and manipulative. Nimmi loves Maqbool with intensity and wishes to get free of Abbaji at all cost. When Maqbool reacts to her impulses, she convinces him to kill Abbaji to assume the role of mafia and accept Nimmi as his own. Maqbool is mentally torn between his love for Nimmi as well as his loyalty for Abbaji. Finally, Maqbool dethrones Abbaji in the same way Macbeth does. Abbaji's death meant a blow to the underworld and forces loyal to Abbaji regroup and launches attack on Maqbool and he meets a tragic death at the hands of Guddu, the son-in-law of Abbaji.

An intense sense of guilt haunts both Maqbool and Nimmi is reproduced by Bharadwaj on screen. The guilt of killing one's own father like figure, haunts him from the very beginning. Maqbool is shown shouting at an old man Ramzu Ahmed:

“Maqbool- e khoon saaf kyu nehi ki aabhi tak
Ahmed- saaf to hai baba”.

Maqbool's mind is pricked by his conscience and he keeps on seeing the blood on the floor, which acts as a premonition to Abbaji's murder. Bharadwaj has recreated also the psychological imbalance of Nimmi in a new way. Nimmi is shown to keep on scrubbing her face, as if there are some stains or rather blood stains of Abbaji. Not only this, she keeps on cleaning the walls of her bedroom which she visualizes to have blood stains. Nimmi's response makes it clear that Nimmi had sacrificed herself for a world of guilt and psychosis. Evil too finds a representation in the film. Instead of the three weird sisters there are the corrupt police inspectors cum astrologers, Purohit and Pandit who prophesizes the paths of Maqbool's life from the very beginning to the end.

What both the movies from different cultural and cartographical planes try to establish is that there is a need to get over from the sheer mimicking process of western models. Though Homi K. Bhabha says this very mimicry in the eastern world earlier was an 'unconscious strategy' to debunk the imperialistic hangover, Kurosawa and much later Bharadwaj attempt to minimize the elite standing that the early eastern learners of western literature have given to Shakespeare. Shakespeare voiced his own cultural and perception of other cultural dimensions. It is entirely the economic success of the colonizers who could pronounce Shakespeare as the greatest figure of English literature. The writer's authority has been a procedure of rendition and not something which was wilfully proclaimed. Such is the case with every writer. The Japanese and Indian cinema has acknowledged the writer by proclaiming it as an adaptation. What followed later in the respective movies is out of the normative zone and intended to voice not only an individual's, but also a socio-cultural or in fact probably a universal psychosis in the various establishments.

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