



REVISITING CLASSICS, ACROSS BOUNDARIES, THROUGH INDIAN CINEMA

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Introduction

The appeal of the classics is forever. They are revisited at every age and many try their hand at interpreting them. The very definition of classic allows this liberty. The fascination with Shakespeare is never ending. He is endearing to all belonging to different nations and to different ages. There is no need to know about Shakespeare to understand his work. It is universal. The works have such a connection to life and human predicament that the connection the reader feels is immediate.

There are three movies in Indian Cinema based on the major intriguing works of Shakespeare which need mention. Indian Cinema is the entertainment for the masses and these masses might not have had an opportunity to read Shakespeare. To introduce Shakespeare and his powerful stories, the directors attempted to bring in Indian flavour into their film. The adaptations were made culturally to appeal them to Indian audience.

The paper is an attempt to analyse and appreciate the adaptation of the director, Vishal Bharadwaj, in terms of mainly among many, the three films, Omkara, Maqbool and Haider as examples of revisiting the classics Othello, Macbeth and Hamlet, across cultures, time zones and boundaries through cinema for Indian audiences.

This paper is an understanding of how the three classics of William Shakespeare Othello, Hamlet and Macbeth have been adapted by Vishal Bharadwaj, an Indian Director to suit Indian sensibility. The stories are popular and have a universal appeal because as Dr. Samuel Jackson rightly and succinctly praises Shakespeare's works as "just representations of general nature".

Broadly the paper discusses two areas. Firstly in what ways has Vishal Bharadwaj retained the flavour of Shakespeare and secondly, in what ways did he modify. As we have noticed cursorily that Othello became Omkara, Macbeth became Maqbool and Hamlet became Haider. The same applies for the other characters.



Maqbool (2003)

Miyan Maqbool - Macbeth ; Nimmi - Lady Macbeth ; Jahangir Khan (Abbaji) - Duncan I of Scotland; Inspector Pandit -Witch (Weird Sisters) ; Inspector Purohit - Witch (Weird Sisters) Kaka - Banquo ; Riyaz Boti - Macduff ; Guddu - Fleance ; Sameera - Abbaji's daughter (Malcolm) Riyaz Boti's wife-Lady Macduff ; Riyaz Boti's son-Macduff's son ; Mughal-Macdonwald; Asif - Cawdor

The powerful representation of Macbeth by Roman Polanski lingers in the mind when one watches Maqbool. The impressions left by the former are unshakeable and the comparisons are compelling. Roman Polanski's job of interpreting Macbeth for cinema goes is brilliant and he does not deviate from the text. His allegiance to the text offers him scope to interpret the action in his own brutally frank way. Now, Vishal Bharadwaj's Maqbool has the complicated task of adapting it to the modern age and to the culturally drenched Indian audiences.

Nimmi (Lady Macbeth) is a mistress to the Jahangir Khan (Duncan of Scotland) as otherwise depicted in the original play. Nimmi is attracted to the much younger, virile and handsome Maqbool. The original play has the collective hurry of Macbeth and his wife to fulfill the prophesy of the witches as the motive behind the murder of Duncan. In Maqbool, we have the love Maqbool has for Nimmi the reason behind Duncan's murder. In Bharadwaj's version Jahangir Khan is seen as a hurdle between Nimmi and Maqbool to consummate their love for each other.

The setting of the story is a Muslim household. The deeply religious intensity of this household can be compared to the passions Shakespeare portrays during Renaissance. Jahangir Khan is an underworld don with a certain level of ethics in conducting his business. Like Duncan who only kills for war. So the murder of Duncan or Jahangir Khan evokes pity in us as they are also endearing human beings. The movie also adapts Banquo's son who is very young in the drama to a grown man in the movie. King Duncan's son is replaced by Sameera a woman. The additional twist in the story is the love angle between Guddu and Sameera. This alliance threatens Maqbool's possible inheritance from Jahangir Khan furthering the decision towards murder. During the wedding ceremony of Sameera and Guddu, Jahangir starts paying attention to another woman, a dancer, Nimmi turns spiteful goading Maqbool into killing Jahangir Khan. So, the murder of Jahangir Khan isn't just vested in spiritual predictions alone in the movie. It is also driven by his human flaws.

Another major adaptation Bharadwaj does is to have two ageing police officers instead of the witches. They are also named keeping in view the power of prediction they have. They are called Pandit and Purohit, which are mystic as well as popular surnames in



India. Brilliantly interwoven into the narrative as jokers or clowns who in the Shakespearean drama have the immunity of humour, thus can afford to speak the brutal truth. In spite of their open condemnation they escape censure.

Unlike the original drama, Nimmi dies after giving birth to a baby boy. This boy is left in the hospital temporarily as Maqbool and Nimmi flee the hunt initiated by Guddu against them. The drama has an intense fight between Macduff and Macbeth ending in Macbeth's death. The movie does not have a duel. The fact that Guddu and Sameera visit the hospital and plan to adopt the child becomes the reason for Maqbool to give up the fight. He is overcome by an unknown peace. The healing act of Guddu and Sameera appeals to his higher logic. Kaka's (Banquo) son adopts Maqbool's son giving the film a surprisingly optimistic end in spite of the gory violence in which all the other characters are killed. Maqbool's son now becomes the heir apparent to Guddu's empire.

Omkara (2006)

Omkara 'Omi' Shukla - Othello; Keshav 'Kesu Firangi' Upadhyaya - Cassio;
Ishwar 'Langda' Tyagi - Iago; Dolly Mishra-Desdemona; Billo Chamanbahar - Bianca;
Indu Tyagi - Emilia; Rajan 'Rajju' Tiwari - Roderigo; Bhaisaab - Duke of Venice

The movie's setting is in rural Uttar Pradesh. In India the rural areas have a law to themselves. The Indian government have a limited access in such areas. A certain amount of crudeness creeps into the movie because of the setting. Profanity filled dialogue replacing the extremely engaging word play of Shakespeare.

The storyline had additional twists and turns. In trying to simplify the original story, the storyline of Omkara adopts the local political strategies of a rural setting. The brilliance of the director lies in adapting the story to that setting. No scene can be viewed beyond the rural setting. The violence, the killing and the betrayal also make sense.

As in the original we have a politician from that area representing the king. The advocate representing the politician is Raghunath Mishra, the Brabario of Othello. He despises the fact that that his daughter chooses her husband. In Othello, the racial reasons might be attributed to, but in Omkara it takes on a feminist perspective of daughters cannot have a voice, there is pride associated in giving them away as property and are only gain their worth in their ability to produce a male child carrying on the family's name. In her choice of Omkara, Dolly upsets her father's aspirations, prompting him to say



Brabario to Othello

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. She has deceived her father and may thee.
(Shakespeare 481)

Raghunath Mishra to Omkara

Baahubali, aurat ki tariya charitra ko mat bhoolna. Jo ladki apne baap ko thuk sakthi hai, vo kisi aur ki sagi kya hogi
(Bharadwaj, Omkara)

This translation verbatim seals the fate of Dolly and sounds the death knell for her. It keeps replaying in Omkara's head often, building up the sense of doubt and suspicion leading to her death in the end.

Along with Omkara's patriarchal mindset, what adds fuel to the fire is Ishwar's scheming to attain Omkara's position through deceit. He too chooses Dolly as the centre for his evil stratagems. A woman, abandoned by her father, doubted by her husband, manipulated by Cassio and cornered by Iago doesn't have an opportunity to escape. These sinister forces gather snatching the life out of her. The death of Desdemona or Dolly in the Indian context is identical making a statement of the inhuman way of perceiving and treating a woman which is still prevalent in the patriarchal societies way back in the 15 century of Shakespeare or the modern times of 21 century. Vishal Bharadwaj understands this in his adaptation.

Haider (2014)

Haider - Prince Hamlet; Arshia Lone - Ophelia; Ghazala Meer - Gertrude ; Dr. Hilal Meer - King Hamlet; Roohdaar - Ghost (Hamlet) ; Khurram Meer - Claudius ; Pervez Lone - Polonius ; Liyaqat Lone - Laertes; Salman 1 - Rosencrantz ; Salman 2 - Guildenstern ; Zahoor Hussain - Fortinbras

Haider brings out the best in the director Vishal Bharadwaj. Now he has been at the task of adapting Shakespeare for the Indian audiences for so long that he evolves as a master story teller utilising his higher faculties for interpreting and adapting. The setting of Kashmir with the backdrop of infiltrated terrorism sets the tone of the political intrigue of Shakespeare's Hamlet.

The basic plot remains the same but for the deft narrative woven around it by the director of the movie in discussion. Ghazala Meer (read Gertrude) is justified by the director's narrative for deceiving her husband. Dr. Hilal Meer (King Hamlet) keeps treating injured terrorists with a humanitarian mindset. Ghazala who loves her child excessively pleads with



him to stop doing so fearing for their lives. The counter terrorism measures were brutal and people disappeared based on a mere doubt that they might be harbouring a terrorist. Now, when Hilal doesn't pay attention to her pleading (in an average Indian household the husband never pays attention to his wife's words), she gives the information away to Hilal's younger brother who is smitten by Ghazala. She offers him a chance of deceiving his brother and sparing the mother and child from a terrible fate. Hilal's brother Khurram Meer gives his brother away. The army takes Hilal away and imprisoned in an undisclosed location. Khurram starts courting Ghazala and she falls for his charm, in spite of her grief of losing her husband.

Another advanced component of the narrative is the introduction of Roohdaar, which literally translated into the bearer of the spirit. It is a real person who has this ability to mingle with the crowd, act undercover and disappear into thin air. He represents a prisoner of war who spent time in jail with Dr. Hilal Meer. He carries a message to Haider from a dead father. The message that Ghazala deceived him and of the place where the father is buried.

The third narrative component of Bharadwaj is transforming Guildenstern and Rosencrantz into two Salman Khans (a very popular movie star) fans who dress and act like their idol thus giving us the comic relief in an relentlessly brutal story.

Some additional elements brought into this advanced narrative are:

- The home of Dr. Hilal Meer is literally devastated as opposed to the figurative collapse in the play.
- The concept of 'chutzpah' in Hindi 'besharam gustakh' which translates back to English as 'unabashed audacity'. It is an element of comedy in a conversation, inebriated Haider has with Salmans. They joke about how Chutzpah rhymes with AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) which was implemented in Kashmir as a counter terrorism measure. It is again mentioned at the square when Haider returns from his father's grave, saddened to the point of insanity. He gathers people around in a square and explains to the people the 'Chutzpah' of the 'AFSPA' in killing innocent people.
- The Elections where Khurram contests, a chance at power, sacrificing and falsely implicating his brother, is similar in effect. The election brings hope to the people of Kashmir creating a space to address the issues at hand. But the problem with talking is, if it begins there is no stopping and every trivial issue gets to be analysed sidelining the major issues at hand. Khurram wins the election by 100 votes in a constituency where 110 votes were registered. There is deafening silence after the cacophony of the elections.
- In a confessional conversation Ghazala Meer has with Haider she complains "I had no identity with your father. He also did not care about us, if he had he wouldn't have staked all his life's belongings on his choices."

(Bharadwaj, Haider)



The feminist perspective is the director's attempt to showcase Ghazala's side of the narrative which is abjectly neglected by Shakespeare.

- The very famous "to be or not to be is the question" translates to various shades in the film. The first instance of this famous line is used by Haider in protesting in front of the army headquarters about the missing people. He shouts "hum hain ki hum nahin", which is a literal translation of the line. The second instance is when the Salmans follow Haider in his reconnaissance with Roohdaar, they need to cross a bridge into the downtown. they ask each other "to go or not to go". The third instance this famous line is used is when Haider has this conversation with Arshia Lone. He says "shakh pe hain yakeen tho, yakeen pe hai shakh mujhe" which translates to "If I trust falsity, then I have to doubt the truth." He also adds "Hum hai ki nahin...sawaal hai aur sawaal ka jawaab bhi sawaal hai....mein rahoon ki mein nahin.....jaan loo ya jaan dhoo" which translates the line in different formats. This wordplay is almost like a tribute to the magic Shakespeare weaves in one of his best plays *Hamlet*.
- The play within the play in *Hamlet* translates to a celebration of the wedding between Ghazala and Khurram. The song and dance sequences which are a fixture in Hindi cinema is satiated. There is also the grave diggers song which introduces the philosophy of death in a more acceptable way.
- Shakespeare's *Hamlet* sees a slew of dead bodies at the end of the play. Director Bharadwaj rewrites the ending differently leaving the audience a sense of hope even if it is flimsy. Ghazala dies in a suicide mission killing Khurram's men hunting Haider down. Khurram is grievously injured but alive. Haider has a clear chance the second time to avenge his father but chooses to let him live walking away alive.

The intertwining of the two narratives, one of the 16 century and the other of contemporary India masterfully has made Haider India's own. A different level of Indianised narrative surpassing the original storyline firmly establishes Vishal Bharadwaj as a master interpreter, adapter and an evolved story teller.

Conclusion

Film as a social and cultural construct is a skill very few directors have. The world cinema has the advantage of dedicated production houses and infrastructural luxury. But, making a film in India which has a complicated sense of performance and which is genre defying is a herculean task. Making a film to suit the Indian audiences adapting from a playwright who does not correspond with the geographical zone or the time zone requires a deep love for the playwright in understanding all the perspectives presented and also to be read between the lines. This art of storytelling also requires the director to understand the dynamics of Indian cinema and the audience's likes and dislikes.



Vishal Bharadwaj as a director has proven to be a master story teller growing and evolving his method of movie making from his earliest *Maqbool*, through *Omkara* and presents his skills with a flourish in *Haider*.

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