

AN ISLAMIC *MACBETH*: MUSLIMNESS IN VISHAL BHARDWAJ'S *MAQBOOL*

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Abstract:

The uniqueness of Shakespeare lies in the universality of his themes as well as in their relevance even after so many centuries. When he wrote *Macbeth* he portrayed the equation between the marginalised Scottish kingdom and the powerful English kingdom, making the marginalised as the apparent centre in the plot. Vishal Bhardwaj, in making his transcultural adaptation of *Macbeth* as *Maqbool* (2003), does no different, as he transfers the themes of Shakespeare's play to contemporary India – Scotland becomes the increasingly powerful yet marginalised world of Pathan Mafia operating in the underbelly of Mumbai. Islamic community being the religious minority of India, Bhardwaj's film puts the marginalised community at the centre, thereby imparting a completely Islamic flavour to *Macbeth* not only in terms of its plot, but also through other minor yet significant details such as architecture, attires of the Muslim characters, their gestures, customs and rituals and even the songs and their lyrics. This paper intends to analyse the portrayal of the Muslim community in the film *Maqbool* by Vishal Bhardwaj.

Keywords: *'otherness', marginalised, community, Islamic, crime, Indo-Islamic.*

The permeation of the Western texts of William Shakespeare into other cultures not only establishes the universality of his themes, but serves as a testament to the efficacy of Barthes's theory of multiple discovery. The ability of Asia greats Akira Kurosawa and Vishal Bhardwaj to involve the elements of Shakespeare's plays in their own films validates the themes explored by Shakespeare as being deeply embedded in human thought and timeless emotions that have been felt in all regions of the world. Kurosawa and Bhardwaj have created original and unique works of art, while basing their works on Shakespeare's play. The outcome proves that the subconscious of the grand narratives of Shakespeare has much to offer after careful probing, catering to all cultures, as artists assume the role of cultural representatives in discovering the repressed elements in Shakespeare's works. Professor I-Chun Wang of National Sun Yat-sen University writes, "*When Shakespeare is introduced to the audience of the other parts of the world, the adaptations oftentimes become cross-cultural reproductions and this manifests in not only various interpretations but also highlights the ways that Shakespeare is read by audiences in other cultures. Once imbued with local cultures, the adaptations help illuminate in a cognitive process the universal meanings in Shakespeare*". In an interview taken by Prashant Singh (from *Hindustan Times*), Vishal Bhardwaj said: "*I had no plans to take up Shakespeare. I had not read Macbeth: I didn't know what it was. But I was clear that I wanted to make a film on the underworld, and I was looking for a great story. By chance, I read an abridged version of Macbeth and wanted to turn it into a gangster film*". Bhardwaj had also confessed later that his interest in

Macbeth was further heightened by his exposure to Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), after which he decided his take on the themes of the play in his film, *Maqbool* (2003). This paper is intended to analyse the portrayal of the Muslim community in the film, *Maqbool* by Vishal Bhardwaj.

From times immemorial, more wars have been waged in the name of religion, which is then imbued into the possession of land, human resources and language. Colonialism as well as conflict between nations is a theme that lurks behind the individual crisis of the characters in Shakespeare's play as King Macbeth's Scotland is ultimately defeated by the powerful and strategically advanced English forces which help Malcolm and Macduff in overthrowing Macbeth. Scotland, though being a part of Europe, is given an *'otherness'* similar to the colonised countries under imperialists. Vishal Bhardwaj, in *Maqbool*, chooses a marginalised crime society of Mumbai, and further delves into the Indian ethnography by having Muslim characters, part of India's religious minority (and therefore the *'other'*), modelled after those by William Shakespeare. A question can be raised as to why the Muslim representation in Hindi cinema is such an important topic to focus on. It is because the mainstream identities of most characters in Hindi films represent the Hindu majority. The Muslim identity and its representation especially within the matrix of modernisation

within our country India, has altered our perspective towards the Muslim community which is more often prejudiced against than for and that reflects itself through the creation of the filmmakers. Added to this is the volatile status of the politically constructed communal conflicts in the name of religion that would not really exist in such gigantic proportions had there not been the maliciously greedy and gossip-hungry media in the disguise of ‘objective and neutral reporting’. As a result, the scenario in Bollywood films is altogether different today: it seems as if the average Muslim is moulded into the identity of a terrorist or a professional killer or a mafia goon, almost without any exception. Although Vishal Bhardwaj is not the first director to do so, he is one of those rarest directors to make not one but two Muslim-centric films: *Maqbool* (2003) and *Haider* (2014), the latter being an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* but placed very topically within the socio-political unrest in Kashmir.

The uniqueness of Bhardwaj’s adaptation of *Macbeth* is its transfer of the themes of William Shakespeare’s play to contemporary India, specifically the increasingly powerful world of organised crime that began to revolutionise its operations resulting in its insidious presence in all departments of Mumbai’s industries. Similar to the political status of Scotland being small as compared to the neighbouring English superpower, which would come to help the Scottish at the end of the play, the social world of *Maqbool* is an Islamic community, the religious minority of the country. It needs to be noted that Bhardwaj’s choice to cast the crime family as run by members of the Muslim community is a conscious decision to comply with the historicity of the turn of the century, when the group, identified by legal and historical commentators as the Pathan Mafia, consisting of chiefly Afghan immigrants, was being challenged by other syndicates in their monopoly of the underworld. By the end of the twentieth century, the power of the Pathan Mafia had been subdued as new gangs began to surface and operate. This is illustrated by the physical appearance of Jahangir, the chief of the group, Bhardwaj’s substitute for Shakespeare’s Duncan. Jahangir is aged, walks with a stoop, and exhibits a repulsive air of decay in the discolouration of his skin.

The film opens with a close up of a rain-drenched windscreen. The naturalistic lighting adds to the grimy look of the windscreen and foreshadows the murky world that would be presented to the audience. The two Hindu policemen, Pandit and Purohit, can be heard through their indistinct voices, probably making crude jokes about an apparently treacherous person called ‘*Mughal*’ as one draws a *kundal* chart, an Indian astrological chart by which the policemen designate the world of Mumbai on the windscreen. The chart will be a recurring motif in the film as the duo predicts the destiny of Maqbool and Kaka. Thus, for Bhardwaj, the witches are not from a world alien or incomprehensible to the natural world, but rather form the ‘*other*’ as they are Hindus in a plot set in the Islamic community. It is also noteworthy, that Maqbool’s foil character here, Kaka, is also not a Muslim but a devout Hindu who enjoys the warmth of his Muslim lord and the friendship of his mostly Muslim gang members. This is one of the many ways in which Vishal Bhardwaj portrays the inversion in his adaptation.

To begin with the characters, the protagonist’s name, which is also the name of the film, is immensely significant. ‘*Maqbool*’ is an Urdu word which is of Persian origin. The word in Persian means ‘accepted’, ‘admitted’ or ‘acceptable’. In Urdu, the word still maintains its meaning but is more used as ‘agreeable’, ‘pleasing’ or ‘popular’; as such the meaning comes from the same root, as someone who is accepted by everyone, one who is popular. Vishal Bhardwaj cleverly named the protagonist and the film as ‘*Maqbool*’ to lace the characters as well as the film with irony. Thus, even in a different language and culture (the Urdu language and the Islamic culture), Bhardwaj successfully brings out the irony as Maqbool is not ‘accepted’ as the head of the crime family after Abbaji. Even Kaka, Maqbool’s closest friend, is unable to accept Maqbool as Abbaji’s replacement owing to his fierce loyalty to Jahangir. Earlier, as Abbaji gives Maqbool the responsibility of handling Bollywood, it can be taken as a subtle hint which suggests that Bollywood is indeed dominated mostly by the Muslims.

Shakespearean plays have been of immense interest in Persian theatre and, thus, have a deep-seated relationship with India’s artistic history. Besides employing features of Persian theatres such as musical performances accompanied by dancing (‘*Mujra*’) which have also become an integral component of Bollywood films, in *Maqbool*, there is an allusion to Indian history in the naming of the chief as Jahangir. Jahangir is the name of the Mughal emperor who reigned in the seventeenth century. The religious harmony shown in *Maqbool* where Muslims and Hindus are seen working together under a Muslim head echoes the policies of religious tolerance and progressiveness implemented by Emperor Jahangir during his reign. The emperor was not without vices and was known for lechery and he started the tradition of rebellion against rulers by rebelling against Emperor Akbar, his own father, to attain the throne. These features are mirrored in Jahangir, the crime lord, whose adopted son Maqbool would plot against him. Jahangir is

referred to as '*Abbaji*' by his subjects, a Muslim term of endearment which connotes fatherhood, an all pervading umbrella sheltering all; whereas Maqbool is at times called as '*Miyan*', a Muslim term similar to the French term '*Monsieur*'.

In a scene belonging to the first half of the film, Jahangir says casually that while he can easily reign over the world, it is Nimmi who reigns over him. Unfortunately, it is the same Nimmi who, after the murder of Jahangir, gradually descends into madness. Nimmi is, it is to be remembered, doubly marginalised as she not only belongs to a minority religion (Islam) in India, but is also a woman, rather a 'kept' woman. The lively woman who could easily manage to hold her own with her innuendos among Jahangir's male peers, loses herself and becomes a creature pathetic in her post-partum insanity. We see Maqbool as he watches her cleansing the '*darned spots*' and simultaneously see her in the reflection of the wardrobe mirror. Insanity, as seen and shaped by a plurality of gazes, thus, becomes apparently the tragic fate for any Indian woman who tries to transgress her given boundaries. The last that we see of this once feisty woman is her corpse covered by her own dupatta, a piece of cloth symbolising the honour of an Indian woman transformed into her own '*kafn*' (Urdu for shroud).

Besides cinematography, Bhardwaj uses his *mise-en-scene*² as cultural signifiers, with the abundance of the colour green in the ruralised domestic environs of the characters consisting of props, indoor walls, mosques, flags, green being the colour considered holy in Islam as it was believed to be the favourite colour of Prophet Muhammad. As Nimmi arranges trysts with Maqbool, excusing herself from Jahangir, they take place in places of sanctity. As she walks to the mosque or '*dargah*' with Maqbool it is accompanied by a Sufi song of love and harmony, "*Tu mere rubaru hai*" ("You are in front of me"), that a group inside the mosque performs in religious offerings. In the two events that are presented as parallel actions, Bhardwaj uses the techniques of cross-cutting to transfer the mood in the diegetic performance in the mosque to the romantic tension of doomed love between Maqbool and Nimmi approach the mosque. The lyrics of the Sufi song "*Tu mere rubaru hai*" of course consists of Urdu words such as '*ibaadat*' ('prayer'), '*rubaru*' ('face to face'), '*mohabbat*' ('love'), '*khubaru*' ('beautiful'), '*tajweez*' ('saying'), '*deedar*' ('glimpse'), and so on. A long shot shows Jahangir walking towards the mosque but he is partially visible due to the numerous Islamic flags over him. This can be interpreted in two ways. First of all, the religious flags hovering over Jahangir, lends him the status of the '*Lord's anointed temple*' (*Macbeth*. 2.3.65) which is later echoed by the policeman Pandit, when he says about Jahangir: "*Minorities ke khuda hai wo*" ("He is considered as the God of the minorities"). While '*khuda*', is the Urdu word for God, '*minorities*' in this context, refers to the Islamic community in Mumbai. Secondly, Bhardwaj apparently designates a higher power, in this case, religion, to identify the nature of relationship between Nimmi and Maqbool and offer a cleansing to the stigmatised status that Nimmi and Maqbool are obligatorily suffering by having to live up to their religion's as well as the society's expectations. The language used in the film ranges from traditional Urdu to contemporary Hindi dialect of Mumbai, popularly known as 'Bombay Hindi'. While Jahangir as a father-figure is referred to as '*Abbaji*', Guddu addresses his father as '*Baba*'.

One must not fail to notice the architecture of the house of Abbaji – the colours of the walls, the shape of the doors, and the design of the windows as well as the courtyard of the house, all of which remind us of the typical Islamic architecture made famous by the Mughals. The walls inside the house are mostly green whereas, the doors have dome-shaped arches like mosques all of which lead to an open, square-shaped courtyard or threshold. The windows and parapets have net-like or '*jali*' design which is a very significant feature of Indo-Islamic architecture. In one scene after Abbaji's death, Sameera is shown to be sitting beside such a window. The mosquito nets which are shown a number of times in the film, also remind us of the *jali*-latticed screens.

In trying to bring out the Islamic culture in the film, Vishal Bhardwaj also pays careful attention to the way his characters dress. While Kaka, the devout Hindu, is chiefly seen with the traditional red Hindu scarf around his neck, Nimmi and Sameera are seen wearing *shararas* during the '*sangeet*' cum '*roka*' (engagement) ceremony of Sameera, Abbaji's daughter. The *sharara* is a three-piece outfit with flared pants for lowers, with a join at or below knee level, generally worn to weddings teamed with a kurti and one or two dupattas. The ensemble is usually finely embellished with *zari*, stone-work, sequins and beads, besides other embellishments. The attire is said to have originated from the design aesthetics of Mughal royalties and has, since then, become popular among Pakistani and Muslim women across the globe. Male Muslim characters in the film like Maqbool and Usman (Abbaji's guard and counterpart of Duncan's chamberlains) are usually seen wearing loose-fitting Pathani suits whereas Jahangir wears a simple jacket over his kurta. Vishal Bhardwaj leaves no stone unturned as the designs of the *mehndi* which Nimmi and Sameera

are shown to be wearing during the pre-wedding ceremonies of Sameera are Arabic in style.

The celebration of Ramadan and thereby Eid are also given much significance in the film *Maqbool* where goats are slaughtered on the terrace as '*kurbani*' or sacrifice. Even other celebrations in the film are tinged with Islamic features which range from the food cooked or consumed (for example, *biriyani*) to the garments worn during the rituals. Ironically after Kaka's murder, his '*gory*' corpse is brought into Abbaji's memorial rites where Maqbool and his confederates kneel swathed in white mourning garb. A number of times throughout the film we hear the chanting of '*azaan*' (the Islamic call to worship) in the background. On the eve of Sameera's wedding, Nimmi manages to spend the day and night with Miyan, and when Miyan wakes up in the morning, he sees Nimmi doing her '*namaz*' which refers to the ritual prayers prescribed by Islam to be observed five times a day. After Jahangir's murder, when Nimmi and Maqbool are apparently staying together, there is another scene of Miyan Maqbool doing the '*namaz*'.

As a part of her elaborate plan of murdering Jahangir and also getting away with it, Nimmi takes advantage of Jahangir's hubris, making him flaunt his authority to his new mistress by forcing his guard, Usman, to drink liquor from a bottle that Nimmi offers to him. Usman, being a very religious Muslim, refuses to drink it. However, Jahangir eventually forces him and he does drink the liquor. In Islam drinking alcohol is considered as a punishable offense. Vishal Bhardwaj shows this through the character of Usman. According to Shaykh Muhammad Saalih al-Munajjid, as per *Al-Maa'idah, 5:90*, Allah says: "*O you who believe! Intoxicants (all kinds of alcoholic drinks), and gambling, and Al-Azlaam (arrows for seeking luck or decision) are an abomination of Shaytaan's (Satan's) handiwork. So avoid (strictly all) that (abomination) in order that you may be successful*". It is also narrated in *Sunan Abi Dawood(3189)* quoting Ibn Umar who said that the Messenger of Allah said: "*Allah has cursed alcohol, the one who drinks it, the one who pours it, the one who sells it, the one who buys it, the one who squeezes it (squeezes the grapes, etc.), the one for whom it is squeezed, the one who carries it and the one to whom it is carried*". Since Usman eventually drinks alcohol by taking the bottle from Nimmi's hands on the insistence of Abbaji, the unfortunate and tragic deaths of all these three characters might be, in a way, interpreted as the curse of Allah.

Apart from the aforementioned significant cultural signifiers, there are few other minor details that add no less to the portrayal of Islamic culture in the film. It is generally observed that in a given place the people belonging to the minority community instinctively pick up some of the habits and traditions of the predominant community in order to blend with the society. In the film *Maqbool*, since Hindus form the minority in Abbaji's crime family, it can be seen that Hindu characters like Pandit and Purohit, at times, speak and gesture like average Muslims while communicating with Maqbool. Such an instance is found at the very beginning of the film when Purohit, sitting inside a van, greets Maqbool over the call with "*Haan Miyan, aadaab*". '*Aadaab*' is an Urdu word used by Muslims to greet another person. More of such instances can be seen when Jahangir declares that Maqbool is to undertake the responsibility of Bollywood. Since Pandit had already predicted this for Maqbool before, after Abbaji's sudden declaration, Maqbool is almost in a state of shock and silently turns his head to look at Pandit and Purohit. Pandit, a Hindu of course, looks at Maqbool and gestures that it is not his will but the Almighty's will. However, what is noteworthy is that Pandit's gesture referring to God is not with folded hands as a Hindu would do but rather with open hands like a Muslim. While no Muslim gang members accompany Kaka when he visits a Hindu shrine, both Kaka and Guddu willingly accompany Abbaji and Maqbool and the others when they visit the mosque.

The film *Maqbool* may, therefore, be seen as a text richly layered with various levels of hierarchy: the illusion created at the beginning, of the margin becoming the centre, paves the way to the final containment and destruction of the transgressors: the marginal trying to possess the centre and thereby their downfall as prescribed by a Hindu patriarchal society.

This is further exemplified with the union of Sameera (the Muslim female) and Guddu (the Hindu male). As Sameera is the daughter and not the son of Abbaji, she cannot succeed him, but Guddu, by marrying Sameera, can become the rightful successor, irrespective of the fact that he is not a Muslim but a Hindu. However, by uniting Sameera and Guddu at the end of the film, Bhardwaj hints at the potential harmony between the Muslims and the Hindus that can be achieved once both the religions are able to accept the stained past without further judgemental stands, which here is represented by Guddu and Sameera's warm acceptance of Nimmi's child.

There are five hundred and twenty-five films which give William Shakespeare some writing credit and of these, two

hundred and ninety-four are full adaptations of his plays. After *Hamlet* followed by *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth* is the third most often adapted Shakespearean play. Out of these adaptations of *Macbeth*, a number of films are transcultural in nature. However, it is only Vishal Bhardwaj who uses the Muslim community as the backdrop for his film with the society under scrutiny being on the wrong side of the law. He does so with perfection, retaining the essence of *Macbeth* as well as portraying the Islamic community of Mumbai, thereby rendering *Maqbool* its unique identity in the world of transcultural film adaptations.



Fig. 1: Jahangir, the aged crime lord.

Source: Google Images



Fig. 2: Purohit (left) and Pandit (right), the two Hindu policemen, Bhardwaj's substitute for the 'witches'. Source: Google Images



Fig.3: A 'Mujra' dance performance in the film.
Source: Google Images



Fig.4: 'Jali' designed window shown in the film.
Source: Google Images



Fig.5: Indo-Islamic architecture of Abbaji's house.
Source: Google Images



Fig. 6: Sameera (right) and Nimmi (left) wearing sharara, a typical Muslim ensemble. Source: Google Images



Fig. 7: Arabic design mehndi on Sameera's hand.
Source: Google Images



Fig. 8: Nimmi doing the 'namaz' after spending the night with Maqbool. Source: Google Images



Fig. 9: Pandit referring to God in a Muslim manner. Source: Google Images

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(Footnotes)

¹ English literary representation of binary oppositions in terms of moral absolutes, class, gender, race, etc. used by scholars working with structuralist, post-structuralist, feminist, Marxist, post-colonialist, and other methodologies.

² The arrangement of everything that appears in the framing – the actors, lighting, décor, props, costumes – is called *mise-en-scène*, a French term that means "placing on stage". The frame and camerawork are also part of this.