

FILM STUDIES



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN
2454 -9495)**

JANUARY 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

***Macbeth* meets *Maqbool*: A Study in Cross-Cultural Dialogism**

***Gita Viswanath**

Shakespeare remains a perennial source of inspiration for filmmakers from as diverse national origins as Roman Polanski, Akira Kurosawa, Orson Welles, Andre Wajda and a few Hindi filmmakers as well. Along with *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *King Lear*, *Macbeth* has been adapted for the screen by several filmmakers. Shakespeare's plays have been adapted by Hindi filmmakers even before Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* (2004). *Comedy of Errors* has two adaptations: *Do Dooni Char* (1968) by Kishore Kumar (with himself and Asit Sen) and *Angoor* (1981) by Gulzar (with Sanjeev Kumar and Utpal Dutt). Mansoor Khan's *Qayamat se Qayamat tak* (1988) is an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. *Hulchul* (2005) is Priyadarshan's comic rendering of the same play. *Maqbool* is the first adaptation of *Macbeth* in Hindi cinema. Located in the grey area between art house and mainstream cinema, *Maqbool* is a dark, absorbing rendering of emotion, sexuality, and lust for power, madness and personal rivalries.

In this paper, I wish to analyze the dialogical process inherent in the shift from *Macbeth* to *Maqbool*. Cinema has a wealth of visual and linguistic signifiers that aid the meaning-making process. Any analysis of film must attend to a deconstruction of these signifiers and relate it to the larger cultural texts that permeate every society. Cinema, as it is understood today, both reflects and constructs categories such as nation, culture and society. To put it in Bakhtinian terms, film may be read as an utterance in a wider socio-economic, political, cultural space. For instance, Orson Welles's adaptation of *Macbeth* (1948) invokes Nazi symbolism, and Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) set in 14th and 15th century feudal Japan is also a comment on the post-war Japan of Kurosawa's time.

FILM STUDIES



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN
2454 -9495)**

JANUARY 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

Maqbool's drama is played out in the subculture of Mumbai's infamous underworld. In this paper it is not *Macbeth* as a Shakespearean drama but the history of its performance that is of interest to me. The term adaptation comes into play when we speak of a literary text made into a film. A brief history of cinematic adaptations would therefore be in order here.

Its history may be traced to the French film maker and magician Georges Melies' *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) based on Jules Vernes' *From the Earth to the Moon*. Adaptations provided a convenient bypass to overcome censorship attacks and a way to achieve respectability as a means of "educating" an audience in the literary classics (Lupack, 1999). If we consider the Bible as a literary work, then the Lumiere Brothers 1897 *La Vie et Passion de Jesus Christ* would rightly be the first adaptation. Early adaptations were a way of assuring the middle classes that cinema was a site of good taste and thus helped dispel notions of cinema as morally degrading. It is also interesting to note here that adaptations have had a pedagogic value as in educating the nation in its rich literary heritage. Several great adaptations of *Macbeth* have been produced in the twentieth century: Orson Welles' *Macbeth* at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem (1936), Margaret Webster's production with Maurice Evans and Judith Anderson (1941) and Glen Byam Shaw's Royal Shakespeare Theatre production with Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh (1955) to name just a few. The practice of adapting literary works to cinema is common to early European cinema too. Some of the European filmmakers were themselves writers (Cocteau, Fassbinder, Handke, etc.). In the Indian context, Satyajit Ray's adaptations of Rabindranath Tagore are legendary (*Teen Kanya*, 1961, *Charulata*, 1964, *Ghare Baire*, 1984). Some of the films released in the 2000s bear testimony to the enduring nature of this practice, fuelled also by a paucity of good original screenplays. Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Mira Nair's *Vanity Fair* (2005) from W M Thackeray's novel of the same name and Rituparno Ghosh's *Raincoat* (2005) from O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" are some instances. In a broad sense, however, I would with some

FILM STUDIES



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN
2454 -9495)**

JANUARY 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

degree of confidence, propose that most Indian films are always already adaptations of two of the greatest epics ever written viz. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. As Gokulsing and Dissanayake put it, “The two epics are at the heart of classical Indian poetry, drama, art and sculpture, nourishing the imagination of various kinds of artists and informing the consciousness of the people” (1998: 17). Stock characters of the ruler, mother, brother, wife and so on that embody the ideal virtues of obedience, subservience to elders, and responsibility towards the subjects – all come from the *Ramayan*. The *Mahabharata*’s truisms of the triumph of good over evil and means justify the ends provide the philosophical underpinnings to the narratives of Hindi cinema. However, these characterizations and ideologies are so entrenched that cinema creates, as Andre Bazin says, a whole new mythology independent of the original (1967). This paper would nevertheless stay with the narrower definition of adaptation.

Early adaptation studies (George Bluestone, 1971) followed the faithfulness/equivalence model from translation studies and thereby invariably condemned adaptations as betrayal of the original. This happened in the discipline of film studies as most scholars came from a literary studies background. A model such as this will have to be jettisoned at the earliest as this paper comes from precisely such a location!

What is the motivation for making an adaptation? Is it the filmmaker’s fascination with a novel/play and his desire to give the world his version/interpretation of the original? What is it about the text that facilitates a translation from the verbal to visual medium? Are there some residues of meaning or the surpluses of a text that impel the filmmaker? Thus, is the filmmaker contributing to what Walter Benjamin calls the “afterlife” of a text. Andrew (1984) and Marcus (1993) have pointed to the value of the changes made in the translation from novel/play to film due to the inevitable economic considerations that operate in film. Marcus (1993) and Monk (1996) have pointed to yet another level of adaptation critique when they insist upon setting the

FILM STUDIES



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN
2454 -9495)**

JANUARY 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

critique within the bounds of a historical and semiotic context (in Hayward, 2004: 6). This paper proposes to take the critique further in order to accommodate the proliferation of visual media coupled with growing literacy rates which has produced a paradoxical generation of people who can read but won't read. We have then, a set of filmmakers who thrive upon adaptations indirectly whetting the viewer's appetites. Bookstores across the country recorded high sales of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Devdas* after Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film 2003 adaptation. Predictably, the cover of the translations bore pictures of Aishwarya Rai who played Paro. Here, it is not any noble intentionality of the filmmaker that leads viewers to the book, the occurrence is merely incidental.

Perhaps it may be fruitful to insert the term translation at this stage as in translating from one medium to other, both in terms of a printed text to cinema screen and stage to cinema screen. The non-centrality of a single author for a filmic text would be unsettling to an author-centric discourse such as translation where we have *an* author being translated by *a* translator. Cinema by contrast is inherently a dialogical mode of narration. A film is the end result of a team rather than an individual. Thus, is the translation produced by and through a cinematic discourse the translation of the producer whose chief interest is economic in nature? Or is it the cinematographer's who influences ways of seeing with his choice of camera angles, shots etc.? Or is it the costume designer's who produces the authentic effects through clothes etc? Or the art director's who painstakingly recreates the ambience of the period in which the story is set? Or finally, is it the translation as imagined by the putative author of a film, viz. the director? Although there are no straight forward answers to these questions, it is worthwhile to frame these questions nevertheless and work through the tangled web we are likely to enter in the process of asking them. The multiplicity and plurality of cinematic discourse thus embodies Bakhtin's notion of dialogism in the very materiality of the filmic form.

FILM STUDIES



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN
2454 -9495)**

JANUARY 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

In the case of *Maqbool*, it is quite clear that it stands in dialogic relation to a performance history spanning almost 400 years of stage and cinematic adaptations. The irony here that eludes most is the fact that somehow we seem to see Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as an originary point of reference whereas the truth is that even Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was an adaptation of Holinshed's *Chronicles*. So, what I am aiming at in this paper is to show the futility of the term adaptation or translation altogether. Each adaptation is best treated as yet another element in the dialogical process. What similarities one finds may be read as points of convergence and the differences as points of divergence. The point of reference is not *the* original or source text but several texts that the adaptation invokes in the process of translation. What results finally stands on its own feet as an individual work.

An examination of the points of convergence and divergence between *Maqbool* and *Macbeth* and its different adaptations seems mandatory in order that we understand the nature of the dialogical process among the several texts. A serious engagement with the source would imply not an intention to fetishize the source, rather to imply that an adaptation could enrich our understanding of the source and not necessarily only vice versa.

Just as the creation of atmosphere was very important for Shakespeare in *Macbeth*, so it appears for Bhardwaj. The film begins with the scene of a heavy downpour, typical of the city of Mumbai. The title of the film is written in blood by an unseen hand on a glass misty with rain. The images seem fit for a horror film but Bhardwaj does not stretch them too far. Subtle and sophisticated, the film straddles the genres of the horror and gangster films, making it appear more like film noir. The urban setting, the neurosis of the protagonists, moods of gloom and pessimism and a cinematographic style that privileges contrast lighting (Hayward, 129) are some of the features of the film noir genre, which may be found in *Maqbool*.

FILM STUDIES



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN
2454 -9495)**

JANUARY 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

Macbeth's preoccupation with the order/disorder dyad is central to an understanding of the play. The Cartesian concept of the self in which the destruction of natural order obliterates the offender is produced as a primordial truth in most cultural productions of the world. Pre-modern histories across cultures are replete with instances of murder of rulers by contenders for the throne. The order that *Macbeth* repeatedly focuses on is one that calls for a stable feudal structure in which personal ambition and the means to fulfill it are seen more as disruptive of a fixed, hierarchical structure rather than as morally appalling. Similar is the case with the dynamics of the underworld. Killings between rival groups, internecine murders and so on are part of the day's routine. In *Maqbool*, Bhardwaj shifts the scenario to the dark spaces of the Mumbai mafia, popularly referred to as the underworld. This is a world that normalizes the murder of rivals and gang lords. The law that operates in the underworld is like that of *Macbeth*'s world, viz. that of the pre-modern era. The "order" that the underworld subverts is that defined by the modern state. The "under" implies the hidden, subterranean, mysterious, unknown, and outside the purview of modern law. Following its own dynamics, the justice delivery system in the underworld is governed by a privately accepted code agreed upon and used by the inhabitants of this world. The change from the privileged royal world to the liminal world of the urban gangster effectively contemporizes the film and yet points to a fundamental similarity between the two worlds. That is, even the underworld is subject to the structures of dominance and subservience that govern the feudal world.

The shift from *Macbeth*'s noble lineage to the underworld indicates Bhardwaj's intention to clearly make an *adaptation* of *Macbeth* and not mere filmed theatre. Such a move forces us to locate the film in other generic moorings, the gangster film in this case. The gangster film, better known in Bollywood as the underworld film has evolved in the midst of off-screen controversies regarding financing of films. Mahesh Manjrekar's *Vaastav* (1999) is one such instance. There have been a spate of gangster films from the nineties onwards (Ram Gopal Verma's *Satya*, 1998

FILM STUDIES



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN
2454 -9495)**

JANUARY 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

and *Company*, 2002, Shimit Amin's *Ab Tak Chhappan*, 2004, etc.). These films with stars such as Sanjay Dutt and Ajay Devgan quite clearly romanticize and glamorize the underworld don. By selecting Irrfan Khan, best known for his film *The Warrior*, Bharadwaj lays bare his intention of making what Bollywood trade pundits refer to as "serious cinema." Defined by choice of actors (not stars), realistic settings, varied camera angles, complex narrative, dark look, "serious cinema" has limited audience appeal. By locating *Macbeth's* story in the Mumbai underworld, Bhardwaj has stretched the possibilities of the universal themes of power, ambition and evil. At the same time there is something profoundly funny to see the regal, noble, tragic hero Macbeth transformed into a gangster. Seen this way, an adaptation can change our perspective of the source.

The witches in *Macbeth* have posed one of the biggest challenges to any production of the play or an adaptation. In eighteenth century theatre it was common to ridicule the witches. By mid nineteenth century, critics started lending a psychological dimension to the witches (Braunmuller, 1999: 31). For most of the play's performance history, the witches were comic providing the play with spectacle. The witches, changed into policemen in the film are reduced to two (played by Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah). They are now a pair, which helps in resorting to the age old practice of using the pair for comedy. In Bollywood, the *jodi* is an old cinematic convention. (Govinda and Sunjay Dutt, Saif Ali Khan and Shah Rukh Khan are some examples of successful comic *jodis*). The localization of *Macbeth* occurs through the use of such Hindi film conventions.

The prophecy stays in *Maqbool* albeit from the mouth of a soothsaying policeman (Om Puri) and his colleague. The prophecy has contributed to the theatrical and emotional effect of the play as well as to its intellectual complexity. In the film, the clairvoyance of the policeman gives it an eeriness which is a prerequisite for a film like *Maqbool* that straddles the genre of film noir. The

FILM STUDIES



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN
2454 -9495)**

JANUARY 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

larger questions of fate, destiny and individual choice are addressed in an analysis of the witches' role. To my mind, besides providing scope for philosophizing, they also act as narrators of the play. In prophesying the events of the unfolding drama, they predict events that would occur at a point in historical time and theatrical time. The viewers are given a hint of the coming events of the play through the witches. Similarly, the policemen delineated as a comic pair perform the task of narrators. When the clairvoyant cop says that Abbaji's (in perhaps his best role ever, Pankaj Kapoor as the corpulent Abbaji (Duncan) is simply brilliant) time has come, we can see it as a premonition of his impending murder. Just as the witches act as instigators, the policemen's connivance and unabashed support for the gang lord make it easy for the gangsters to function. It is a comment on the class solidarity that builds up despite the divide between the keepers of law on the one hand and its breakers on the other. Throughout the film, the policemen are shown as pathetic characters completely at the mercy of the gangsters. *Macbeth* is structured around an opposition immanent to it: the supernatural world and the military-political world. The two worlds intersect when Macbeth and Banquo meet the witches. The witches represent one kind of chaos (universe) and Macbeth and Banquo the approaching chaos in the outer (kingdom) and inner (psyche) worlds. In *Maqbool*, the underworld represents the chaotic other of the State and the police who have switched roles by being sidekicks to the gangsters point to the rot in the system. The transformation facilitates Bhardwaj's realistic mode of narration characteristic of Bollywood's serious cinema.

Early audiences of *Macbeth* would have labeled even Lady Macbeth as a witch or as a possessed woman. With the support of sixteenth century medical notions of amenorrheal women, Lady Macbeth is desexualized and made "male" i.e. with beard, no menstruation and no compassion, in order that it would be easy to imagine her as motivator of regicide. For more than a hundred years after the Restoration, Lady Macbeth was represented as a bloody-minded, diabolical woman driving her noble husband to regicide. Hannah Pritchard and Sarah Siddons are early

FILM STUDIES



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN
2454 -9495)**

JANUARY 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

examples who perfected playing Lady Macbeth in this manner. By late 1830s and 40s, Lady Macbeth had changed to the devoted wife ready to do anything for the sake of the husband's career. When the actress Ellen Terry played Lady Macbeth as gentle and feminine, she was accused of "whitewashing" the character (Braunmuller, 1999: 78). In *Maqbool*, Nimmi (played by Tabu) makes a very interesting departure. She is shown to be a mistress of Abbaji before she is a mistress (not wife) of Maqbool. This change gives Maqbool's action of killing Abbaji the dimension of a passion crime, which is quite new to the performance history of *Macbeth*. Shades of such a characterization can be found in the Polish filmmaker Andrez Wajda's *Siberian Lady Macbeth* which is about the intrigues of a cold blooded married woman, Katarina, (Olivera Markovic) who is in love with a vagrant (Ljuba Tadic). When her father-in-law (Bojan Stupica) discovers the affair, she kills him with pesticide. Perhaps one could read some linkages between Wajda's and Bhardwaj's Lady Macbeth. Both may be represented as bold and open about their passion but the *Siberian Lady Macbeth's* lover is not the equivalent of Duncan. I would conjecture that *Maqbool's* generic moorings in the gangster film provide the opportunity to Bhardwaj to represent Nimmi (Lady Macbeth) as Abbaji's (Duncan's) lover. The gangster's moll, an archetype in gangster films is unlike the chaste, virtuous heroine of family dramas in Hindi cinema. Generally shown as sexually demanding, she is also cunning and capable of conspiracy. The *femme fatale* figure is typical of the film noir genre which is about power relations and sexual identity. The film noir hero allows the heroine to dominate because of his own insecurities. Usually, the *femme fatale* pays at the end for being intelligent and in charge of her sexuality and having agency. In Nimmi's case, it is through death. But what we do remember of her is not the price she had to pay but her independence and sexual expressiveness. As Janey Place says, "It is not their inevitable demise we remember but rather their strong, dangerous and above all, exciting sexuality" (1980: 37). Her death is a way of containing the ideological contradictions she opens up. Death then is a diegetic compulsion for the protagonist of film noir.

FILM STUDIES



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN
2454 -9495)**

JANUARY 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

Macbeth murders Duncan in a hypnotic condition. The horror of regicide is blunted through the demented minds of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Most stage productions refrain from depicting the murder as a cold, calculated move. Rather it is shown as done in a state of stupor, hypnosis, trance or demonic possession. In the film, the murder scene is shot with the camera placed in front of Maqbool slowly emerging from behind a door. Then the camera quickly shifts its focus on the sleeping Abbaji and the blood spattered face of Nimmi while the soundtrack reverberates with the sound of a gun shot. The scene registers Nimmi's shock despite her being an instigator to the murder. This sets the narrative for the story of subsequent guilt and dementia. The banquet in *Macbeth* is here a wedding feast. Instead of Banquo's ghost, Maqbool hallucinates about the blood of the goats slaughtered for the *biryani*. Shot in the night on a terrace under a starless sky, the scene is dark and eerie with the sound of a broom going repeatedly over the bloodstains. Maqbool's bloodied ascent to power brings with it a guilt-ridden conscience for both lovers. In the visual medium, there is no need for lines such as "All the perfumes of Arabia cannot sweeten this little hand." As Susan Sontag reminds us cinema provides us with a new language, in which emotion can be essayed through the direct experience of body language (1966).

The political conservatism of Macbeth translates into a similar conservatism in *Maqbool* wherein the unwritten codes of the underworld need to be respected or else the consequence is total annihilation. Nimmi loses her child; Maqbool kills Nimmi in a frenzied state when he disconnects the life-supporting tubes, and is himself killed at the end of the film. While the underworld that dared to subvert the state is destroyed, the moral order that Hindi cinema has always upheld is restored.

By way of conclusion, I would like to go back to the point I had raised in the beginning about each adaptation being just one more narrative, stylistic and cultural element in the dialogical process, in which we need not worry about the originary moment of the utterance. Thus we have

FILM STUDIES



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN
2454 -9495)**

JANUARY 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

seen that *Maqbool* can be related to several different contexts such as other adaptations, Hindi film conventions, and generic imperatives. So it would be enriching to understand it as yet another interpretation rather than view it as emerging vertically downward from a pure pristine original. By reading an adaptation as an individual work of art in juxtaposition with the socio-economic and cultural context, as well as engaging with other cultural productions, we are better able to appreciate the *process* of translation from the verbal to the visual medium.

Works Cited:

- Andrew, D. *Concepts in Film Theory*. London: Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Bazin, Andre. *What is Cinema? Vol 1*. (trans. H Gray) Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.
- Bluestone, George. *Novels into Film*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971.
- Braunmuller, A R (Ed.). *Macbeth*. New Delhi: Foundation Books, (Reprint) 1999.
- Gokulsing, Moti and Wimal Dissanayake. *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1998.
- Hayward, Susan. *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies*. London and New York: Routledge, (First Indian Edition), 2004.
- Lupack, Barbara Tapa, (Ed.) *Nineteenth Century Women at the Movies: Adapting Classic Women's Fiction to Film*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999.
- Marcus, M. *Filmmaking by the Book: Italian Cinema and Literary Adaptation*. USA: John Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Monk, C. "Review of *Sense and Sensibility*." *Slight and Sound*, Andre Bazin 16, Issue 3.
- Place, Janey. "Women in Film Noir." Ann Kaplan (Ed.) *Women in Film Noir*. London: British Film Institute (Rev Ed.), 1980.
- Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966.

*Gita Viswanath is the author of *The Nation in War: A Study of Military Literature and Hindi War Cinema* published by Cambridge Scholars, UK. She has a Ph.D from Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda in Literature and Cinema. She has published articles in academic journals and poetry in *Kavya Bharati*. She also writes a travel blog.