

(Trans) porting Play-texts into Films: Dynamics of De/Re-contextualization in Select Appropriations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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ABSTRACT

*Film appropriation is an aesthetic transportation of a 'literary text' or 'theatrical text' in the form of a 'motion text' or film. It is an ongoing process and is heavily grounded in interdisciplinarity. To make a film appropriation, one needs to de-construct the pre-established contextual affinity of the text and to re-contextualize it again in a different scenario. The subtlety, artistry and skillful handling of this process of transportation indeed make a successful appropriation. Throughout the ages, a large number of canonical Shakespearean texts have been de/re-contextualized and appropriated by film-makers across the globe. My paper aims to analyze two of the cinematic appropriations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* viz. *Scotland, PA* (2001) and *Maqbool* (2003) in the light of de/re-contextualization.*

Key Words: *transportation, appropriation, de/re-contextualization, canonical Shakespearean texts*

To be brief, 'film appropriation' is an aesthetic transportation of a 'literary text' or 'theatrical text' in the form of a 'motion text' or film by appropriating the basic frame-work, ideas, concepts, theoretical standpoints, motifs of the literary text to an altogether different time-setting, geo-political and socio-cultural situation. So, to make a film appropriation, one needs to de-construct the pre-established contextual affinity of the text and re-contextualize it in a different scenario. The subtlety, artistry and skillful handling of this process of de/re-contextualization indeed make a successful appropriation. Film appropriation is an ongoing process and is heavily grounded in interdisciplinarity. Appropriation, as opposed to

'adaptation', deals with change in terms of the original point of enunciation; whereas in an adaptation, the original point of enunciation remains the same. Unlike adaptation, the art of film appropriation concentrates more on the audience than on the author of the 'source-text' or 'reference-text'. If film appropriation explores a dynamic, interesting and popular field of transportation of literary texts into films, Shakespearean texts contribute to this field to a great extent. A large number of canonical Shakespearean texts have been de/re-contextualized and appropriated by film-makers across the globe. My paper aims at an analysis of two cinematic appropriations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* viz. *Scotland, PA* (2001) and

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Maqbool (2003) in the light of de/re-contextualization.

Successful Shakespeare appropriations exhibit brilliant handling of contextual and socio-cultural shift. Fred M. Wilcox in *Forbidden Planet* (1956) fits *The Tempest*, one of the 'Last Plays' of Shakespeare, into the science fiction mould. Akira Kurosawa's *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960) is a dark appropriation of Hamlet, and the film is set in the corrupt corporate world of post-World-War Tokyo. In *Ran* (1985), Kurosawa appropriates *King Lear* to the context of feudal, samurai Japan. Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet* (1996), set in an American context, delineates the *Romeo and Juliet* story. It represents the Montagues and the Capulets as warring mafia empires and Shakespeare is here truly 'Americanized'. Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard* (1996) is an appropriation of Richard III and it reflects the ways we have understood Shakespeare at the end of the twentieth century. In the film *King is Alive* (2000), Leving relocates *King Lear* in an abandoned mining town in the Namibian desert. Nelson's *O* (2001) is an appropriation of Shakespeare's *Othello* for a teen film. These aforesaid details highlight an enriching tradition of film appropriation of Shakespearean texts in general with a brilliant display of de/re-contextualization. This tradition will unfold with even greater vigor if we pay attention to the appropriations of *Macbeth* in particular, down the ages. Ken Hughes' *Joe Macbeth* (1955) resettles the story of *Macbeth* amidst a gang-war in Chicago. Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) is an appropriation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and stands as a meeting point of western and Japanese classical modes. The first series of *The Black Adder* (1983) is a parody of *Macbeth*.

William Reilly's *Men of Respect* (1991) retells the story of Macbeth as a mafia power struggle in New York. Coping brilliantly with this treasure-house of Shakespearean appropriations, Billy Morrisette's *Scotland, PA* (2001) and Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* (2003) have registered an esteemed place.

Billy Morrisette's *Scotland, PA* is a restructuring of *Macbeth* as a 'black comedy' that takes place in Pennsylvania. Morrisette here, not only de-contextualizes Shakespeare's 'tragedy of ambition' from its seventeenth century ambience of monarchism, ambition for the throne, witchcraft, valorous battles etc., but re-contextualizes it in a fast-food corner, expanding from a mere restaurant to a food industry, in a small American rural town. *Scotland, PA* is partly a parody of *Macbeth* and a pungent satire on modern consumer culture and class aspirations. The setting of seventeenth century *Macbeth* is also radically altered; Morrisette has transferred it to a colonial site, Pennsylvania, or PA in short. Regarding the setting, Jess Cooke comments in *Shakespeare on Film*, "Scotland, PA imaginatively transfers the play's setting to its colonial 'sequel', which was founded in the nineteenth century by Scottish immigrants" (91). The film projects America in the 1970s where Macbeth turns into McBeth and his wife Pat becomes emblematic of Lady Macbeth. The couple works at a small town food restaurant owned by Norm Duncan, a substitute for King Duncan in *Macbeth*. Norm Duncan is found rejecting McBeth's plea for promotion; he also casts aside McBeth's idea of improving the store and spreading the business through a French fry truck and chicken nuggets with dippings. Being thwarted by the proud, autocratic attitude of Duncan, McBeth

and Pat become disappointed thinking of their bleak future in the hands of the stubborn master. Continual dissatisfaction and disappointment give birth to the ambition of going beyond the clutches of the master. The instigating agency of the supernatural is also presented here, but with certain variations as the weird sisters are transformed into gay hippies with individual names Stacey, Hector and Jesse. This projection is evocative of the emergence of the hippies in America during the 1970s.

The ambition of Mc and Pat of getting rid of the master gradually starts to take on a 'black' texture when they initiate the plan to remove Duncan and take hold of the whole food manufacturing company. When Duncan's sons are declared as new managers, the couple becomes desperate. Eventually Duncan is killed by two of his employees who drown his head in the sizzling oil contained in a French-fryer. Usurping the 'fast-food empire' of Duncan, Mc and Pat illegitimately grab it. The continuous haunting of Lady Macbeth's guilty conscience is reflected in Pat's fearful consciousness of the burn that she gets on her hand while killing Duncan. They introduce new business ideas: with 'the nomadic technology of drive through and moving French trucks', Mc's business prospers. Soon, Mc and Pat's socio-economic status and power increase as well. However, their success is hampered by the advent of a vegetarian detective Lieutenant McDuff who starts to investigate Duncan's murder. Time and again he begins to come to the couple and pursue them tirelessly. One day, when McBeth is found to wander through Birnam wood for hunting with Banco and his friends, McDuff gets the opportunity

to venture into the food-processing unit and their living space, and here he is able to collect ample evidence against McBeth. One thing to be mentioned, at this juncture, is that the Birnam wood here is represented as a wildlife preserve or a forest park. Eventually, McDuff vanquishes McBeth in a climactic sequence on the roof of the hotel. The ending of *Scotland, PA* is quite different from the play-text: instead of Malcolm, McDuff takes hold of the fast food manufacturing enterprise and the restaurant, remodeling it for the second time after his own name. Courtney Lehman quite remarkably comments in *Out Damned Scot*: "Unlike the other Macbeth films...*Scotland, PA* is the only one that privileges place over protagonist, underscoring the notion that this is not really Mc's tragedy but PA(T)'s, the figure most identified with her surroundings" (246). Like *Macbeth*, here in *Scotland, PA*, we can certainly see the interplay of the dual machinery of ambition, one comes from Mc and the other from Pat. Like Lady Macbeth, Pat also requires a man to execute her plan of reaching high, and here the man is none other than McBeth. Lady Macbeth's deterioration into insanity and subsequent death has been reflected in Pat's obsession with the burning mark which ultimately drags her to insanity. It makes her so depressed that she even goes on to remove her hand off out of guilt-consciousness.

The film provides us a beautiful cluster of 'rock' music composed by the English rock band Bad Company, which was founded in 1973 and created euphoria throughout Europe during 70s. This rock musicality in the film has created a prominent socio-cultural ethos of the then America and has helped the film-maker to create a successful 'Americanized

Shakespearean appropriation'. The film is also dominated by drinking, eating and lecherousness.

Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe remark:

...the intrusion of the fast food industry into urban and rural communities has become a dominant symbol of the evils of globalization. Where Shakespeare's play provides for Malcolm's return to the throne, Morrissette's film provides the equivocal triumph not of individuals but of an industry. (107)

The film pin-points McBeth's desire for 'private ownership' and in its attempt to project that, the film also satirizes contemporary American consumer culture and market economy. Mc, the male protagonist, is also emblematic of the towering ambition which is at the core of the American Dream. Being instigated by the 'post-industrial capitalist boom', American Dream propagated material gain, worldly success, money, happiness and freedom, or, better to say, 'license'. In Horatio Alger's words, it is the 'rags to riches' instinct that hastened the immoral access of this Dream in the humdrum lives of ordinary individuals. The desperate attempt of the ordinary couple, Mc and Pat, to grab the food industry and reach to the level of extra-ordinary is indeed evocative of this harmful American Dream. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's joint venture to murder Duncan and grab the Scottish throne is beautifully de/re-contextualized by Morrissette in the form of Mc and Pat's plot to murder their boss and possess the ownership of the fast food manufacturing industry.

Shakespeare has been a rich store-house for film-makers in matters of appropriations, over the globe, and Indian Bollywood is not lagging far

behind in this regard. Vishal Bhardwaj's film, *Maqbool* (2003) is a Bollywood appropriation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, crafted as a Mumbai gangster film. It aesthetically fuses the basic motifs of *Macbeth* - ambition, treachery, bloody violence, fall, and death- with the complex and crude power-mongering of the Mumbai underworld. The film is Bhardwaj's 'retelling' of *Macbeth* in the context of smuggling, contract killing, and corporate crime against the backdrop of the Mumbai of the 1960s and 1970s. Shakespearean 'tragedy of ambition' is decontextualized here from the Elizabethan concepts, values and perspectives such as politics of kingship, witchcraft, 'de-sexed' woman-hood, revenge etc. Being set in urban Mumbai during 60s and 70s, *Maqbool* exhibits the illegitimate rise of Mian Maqbool to power in the underworld empire of Abbaji/Jahangir Khan by dethroning and killing him, and also displays subsequent fall and death of the same (Maqbool). *Maqbool* is a story of passion, power, seduction coupled with brooding crime and reverberating self-punishment. The movie reveals the politics of power, lust, and passion simultaneously as Mian Maqbool, the right hand man of the ganglord, Abbaji, falls in love with Abbaji's throne and mistress both. A saga of massacre ensues. Nimmi, Abbaji's mistress, plays the same crucial role here as that of Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*. She plants the seeds of treachery in Maqbool's mind. Nimmi's stand-point introduces issues of lust and extra-marital relationship in the narrative. Cataclysmic intervention of the witches and their prophesying are transformed into selfish instigation of the cops and their kundali/horoscope. Colours of Indian gangsterism and Mumbai-underworld become far more prominent as the two

cops in the film are presented almost like slaves, sufficiently bribed by the gang; their kundali/horoscope, like the witches' prophecy, acts as a signifier of forthcoming violence, predicts both success and failure for Maqbool. Just like the witches, they act like slaves but only to make Maqbool their slave. Throughout the story, Maqbool is haunted by hallucinations, manifestations of his 'guilt-consciousness' and 'fear to fall', and it affects him a lot to hold his gangster-empire, grabbed by usurping Abbaji. Freudian interpretation of the hallucination as an articulation of 'id' is as vivid here as in *Macbeth*. The film ends with the death of Maqbool, inflicting and projecting violence and blood, but this time on the killer.

Kathy M. Howlett remarks: "gangster films emphasize the historical realities of crime while celebrating the criminal protagonist" (136); the same thing is reflected in *Maqbool*. Besides celebrating the eponymous criminal protagonist *Maqbool*, it also emphasizes the historical realities of crime and gangsterism in urban India. The film speaks unmistakably of the concealed interlink between underworld administration and Bollywood. Unlike most of the Bollywood films, *Maqbool* limits the exuberant employment of music and songs. Bhardwaj, himself being the music-composer of the film, applies delicate tunes that often act as the background score of a particular situation, whether of seduction, guilt-consciousness or of revenge. Hence the music of the film seems not supplementary but complimentary to the core. Bhardwaj, here, tries to hold the 'soul' of *Macbeth* and cinematically changes its 'physic' through the process of de/re-contextualization. This is evident

from the utterance of the film-maker himself in an interview, "[I] have tried to be true to the play's spirit than to the original text" (Bhardwaj, "Rediff Interview"). The film ventures to assimilate Shakespeare, 'a global phenomenon' to Bollywood gangster genre and an urban Mumbai setting, and thus articulates the 'translocal', 'transnational' and 'glocal' forms, emerging in 'post-millennial Shakespearean cinema'.

Besides these bold impressions of de/re-contextualization in terms of time, space, society and culture, *Maqbool* has displayed a crucial ideological shift as well. It is been an age-old concept that drama is basically an aesthetic output; hence it should desist from all 'foul display'. By 'foul display', the classical masters primarily mean 'open display of blood-shed'. Though Shakespearean productions, in their time, challenged most of the orthodox parameters of classical dramaturgy; in the play-text *Macbeth*, we see Shakespeare maintaining the afore-said convention, at least in the case of Duncan's murder which is merely reported without making an open stage-display. In Shakespeare's text, we only have Macbeth's statement- "I've done the deed" and the blood-stained dagger is ocular proof of the heinous deed he has committed by killing Duncan. But here in *Maqbool*, the murder of Abbaji is displayed in utmost detail. Regarding this naked, bloody projection of murder, Bhardwaj has never felt that it has affected the aestheticism of the film at any point. Such sensational detailing and display of murder is also designed by Roman Polanski in his widely celebrated film adaptation of *Macbeth* (1971). The basic reason behind such projections by noted modern and post-modern directors may be

illustrated by Bamber's words: "If you make a film about murder, you have to show the murder...If you use the screen as a medium, then what you tell has to be told by visual means."

What gangster films do have in common is the 'quest for power' in the context of the protagonist's racial or ethnic difference and in a putative world where illegal activities and its exercise are the only and best means to achieve power. Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* fulfills this issue to the core. One thing that may crop up, at this juncture, in the psyche of an audience with a scholastic bent of mind is, 'To what extent should one consider it a Shakespearean appropriation in a gangster film and to what extent should one take it as another gangster film?' An answer may be attempted in this way that a gangster film must be taken by an audience just to be a gangster film, sometimes to have pure entertainment, and sometimes to enjoy a 'meta-textual life for digesting and negotiating a position in the gangster pantheon'

Poststructuralism challenges systematized constructs like 'text and its originality', 'autonomy of the Author', objective of a text in the form of 'signified' etc. Contradicting these issues, poststructuralists argue in favour of the 'decenteredness' of the text. Challenging the search for the objective or 'signified' of a text, they raise their voice in support of the study of a text in terms of 'multiple signifiers'. Film appropriations, functioning in an interdisciplinary way, conform to these poststructuralist parameters to a notable degree, with more dynamism.

Thus, these two film appropriations, *Scotland, PA* and *Maqbool*, not only show skillful handling

of de/re-contextualization by the respective filmmakers, they also vindicate the range and dynamism this de/re-contextualization may give to a text. In an oblique manner, this kind of transportation and dynamism of a Shakespearean play-text again proves that Shakespeare is truly for all and for all time.

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