

**EXPLORING THE POLITICAL UNDERTONES IN VISHAL BHARDWAJ'S
TRILOGY OF SHAKESPEAREAN ADAPTATIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF *MAQBOOL*,
OMKARA AND *HAIDER***

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Abstract

This article analyzes the political undertones in Vishal Bhardwaj's trilogy of Shakespearean adaptations - *Maqbool*, *Omkaara*, and *Haider*. The paper explores how Bhardwaj weaves the themes of power, corruption, and betrayal into the fabric of each film, with specific attention to how the films draw on the context of contemporary Indian politics. The article provides a comparison of each film to its Shakespearean source material, examining how Bhardwaj reinterprets the plays to suit an Indian context. The study also highlights the use of music and lyrics in *Haider* to underscore its themes of political oppression and resistance.

KEYWORDS

Bhardwaj, corruption, Haider, India, Omkara, power, Shakespeare.

Introduction

"By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes."

- William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

These haunting words from *Macbeth* seem to echo through the trilogy of Shakespearean adaptations directed by renowned Indian filmmaker, Vishal Bhardwaj - *Maqbool*, *Omkaara*, and *Haider*. In each of these films, Bhardwaj skilfully intertwines the classic tales of ambition, jealousy, and revenge with the grim realities of contemporary Indian society.

While these films are known for their exceptional storytelling, powerful performances, and brilliant cinematography, they also have strong political undertones that often go unnoticed. Through his adaptations, Bhardwaj offers a scathing critique of the political landscape in India, highlighting issues such as corruption, power struggles, and violence.

Bhardwaj's adaptations are not mere retellings of Shakespeare's plays. They are nuanced explorations of power, corruption, and violence, set against the backdrop of a society grappling with the consequences of communalism and political upheaval. Through his films, Bhardwaj

weaves a tapestry of characters and themes that mirror the complexities of modern India.

This article delves into the political subtext of Bhardwaj's Shakespearean adaptations and explores how he uses his films as a tool to comment on contemporary Indian politics. We begin by providing an overview of the political context in which the films were made, before delving into each adaptation in turn. By analysing the characters, themes, and symbols in *Maqbool*, *Omkaara*, and *Haider*, we aim to shed light on the political undertones of Bhardwaj's films and highlight their relevance to contemporary Indian society.

Political Context and Overview

The political landscape in India has been fraught with complexities for decades, shaped by a history of colonialism, postcolonial nation-building, and identity politics. The issues of communalism, corruption, caste-based discrimination, and violence have been central to the Indian political scene for a long time, and they continue to shape contemporary Indian society. Against this backdrop, Vishal Bhardwaj's Shakespearean adaptations provide a searing critique of the political establishment and its failures to address the pressing issues facing the country.

One of the most significant political issues in India is communalism, which refers to the division of society along religious lines. Communalism has been a contentious issue in India for decades, and it has often resulted in violent clashes between different religious communities. The 1992 Babri Masjid demolition and the 2002 Gujarat riots are two examples of communal violence that have scarred the country. These incidents have resulted in deep-seated mistrust and animosity between different communities, and have highlighted the failure of the state to protect its citizens from such violence.

Another critical issue in India is corruption, which has been a pervasive problem for decades. Corruption affects all levels of society, from the lowest rungs of the bureaucracy to the highest levels of government. It undermines the rule of law, erodes public trust in institutions, and perpetuates poverty and inequality. The Commonwealth Games scam and the Coalgate scandal are just two examples of high-profile corruption cases that have shaken the country.

Caste-based discrimination is another significant issue in India, with millions of people facing discrimination based on their caste. The caste system, which is deeply entrenched in Indian society, has led to the marginalization of certain communities and perpetuated inequality. While the Indian constitution prohibits discrimination based on caste, it remains a pervasive problem in many parts of the country.

Against this political backdrop, Bhardwaj's adaptations offer a powerful commentary on the state of Indian society. In *Maqbool*, for example, he uses the story of *Macbeth* to comment on the nexus between political power and violence. The film's protagonist, *Maqbool*, is a henchman who becomes embroiled in a power struggle with his boss, Abbaji. The film highlights the corrupt and violent nature of politics in contemporary India and shows how the desire for power can lead to the destruction of individuals and society at large.

In *Omkaara*, Bhardwaj explores the theme of caste-based discrimination through his adaptation of Othello. The film depicts the power struggle between Langda, a lower-caste man, and Kesu, a higher-caste man, for the love and trust of Othello, a police officer. Through this story, Bhardwaj highlights how caste discrimination perpetuates inequality and perpetuates violence.

Finally, in *Haider*, Bhardwaj tackles the issue of militarization and surveillance in contemporary India. The film, which is an adaptation of *Hamlet*, depicts the story of a young man who returns to his hometown in Kashmir to investigate the disappearance of his father. The film highlights the impact of militarization and surveillance on everyday life in Kashmir and the resistance that arises in response to state oppression.

This article will further analyse the three movies, with reference to the political undertones, while also comparing the same to those in the original Shakespearean plays.

Analysis

BHARDWAJ'S 'MACBETH FROM MUMBAI' – MAQBOOL

Maqbool is a Shakespearean adaptation of *Macbeth* that is set in the criminal underworld of Mumbai. The film explores themes of power, loyalty, and betrayal in a world where violence and corruption are the norm. At the same time, it also reflects the political realities of contemporary India, and its portrayal of the nexus between politics and crime has been the subject of much analysis.

One of the most striking examples of the film's political undertones is the character of Abbaji, who is based on the character of Duncan in *Macbeth*. Abbaji is a powerful underworld don who also has close ties to politicians, and his assassination sets in motion the events of the film. His character is a clear reference to the nexus between politics and crime in contemporary India, and his death symbolizes the breakdown of the system that allows such corruption to flourish.

Another example of the film's political undertones can be seen in the character of Kaka, who is

based on the character of Banquo in *Macbeth*. Kaka is a loyal henchman of Abbaji, and he is murdered by *Maqbool* at the behest of his lover Nimmi. Kaka's murder symbolizes the cost of blind loyalty and the price of betrayal in a world where power and violence reign supreme.

The film also explores the theme of political ambition, which is a central theme in *Macbeth*. *Maqbool's* desire to become the don is driven by his ambition, and he is willing to do whatever it takes to achieve his goal. This is reflected in the scene where he tells Nimmi,

"I will become the don. If I don't become the don, I'll be nothing. The man who doesn't have anything, doesn't have a name."(Bhardwaj, 2003)

While both *Maqbool* and *Macbeth* explore the theme of power and the corrupting influence of unchecked ambition, their political undertones differ significantly. *Macbeth* is set in a feudal society where power is concentrated in the hands of the monarchy and the nobility, and there is little room for upward mobility. In contrast, *Maqbool* is set in modern-day India where the political system is democratic, but power is still concentrated in the hands of a few powerful individuals and their criminal networks.

In *Macbeth*, the political undertones are subtle and implicit, with the play exploring the tension between the divine right of kings and the earthly desire for power. However, in *Maqbool*, the political undertones are more overt, with the film exposing the nexus between politics and crime and the corruption that pervades the political system in contemporary India.

For example, in *Macbeth*, the character of Macbeth reflects on the corrupting influence of power when he says,

"I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself / And falls on th'other"

(Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 7, lines 25-28).

This quote shows how Macbeth recognizes that his desire for power has overtaken him and that he will ultimately suffer the consequences.

Similarly, in *Maqbool*, the character of Kaka reflects on the nexus between politics and crime when he says,

"Politics is the biggest crime. Once you become a politician, you can do anything"
(*Maqbool*, 2003).

This quote highlights the corrupt system that allows criminal elements to gain power through politics in contemporary India.

Furthermore, in *Maqbool*, the characters' ambition and thirst for power are not just personal desires, but also reflect their desire to gain political influence and control. For example, in the film, the character of Abbaji is a powerful political figure who wields immense influence through his criminal network. He is able to manipulate the political system to his advantage and is shown to have control over the police and other government officials. This reflects the corrupt nature of the political system in contemporary India, where criminals are able to gain power and influence through politics.

Overall, while *Macbeth* explores the tension between the divine right of kings and the earthly desire for power in a feudal society, *Maqbool* exposes the corrupt system that allows criminal elements to gain power through politics in contemporary India. These different political undertones reflect the unique historical and cultural contexts of the two works.

A TALE OF ENVY AND BETRAYAL – OMKARA

Omkara, Vishal Bhardwaj's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, is set in the rural heartland of India and explores themes of jealousy, betrayal, and revenge. However, the film also has strong political undertones that reflect the social and political realities of rural India.

One of the key political undertones in *Omkara* is the issue of caste. In the film, the character of Langda Tyagi, who is *Othello*'s Iago equivalent, is depicted as a lower-caste man who is envious of the power and privilege enjoyed by the upper-caste *Omkara*. He uses his cunning and manipulative skills to turn *Omkara* against his wife, Dolly, and ultimately engineer his downfall. Langda Tyagi's character represents the simmering anger and resentment of lower-caste people who are excluded from political power and denied social mobility. He says,

"For how long will we keep taking orders from these upper-caste people? For how long will we keep doing their dirty work?"

(Bhardwaj, 2006)

This quote highlights the caste-based power structures that exist in rural India, where upper-caste individuals hold sway over politics and society.

Another political undertone in *Omkara* is the issue of corruption in politics. The film portrays the corrupt and exploitative nature of electoral politics in rural India, where politicians use money and muscle power to win elections. The character of Bhaisaab, a corrupt politician who is also *Omkara*'s mentor, epitomizes this political culture. He is shown to be involved in criminal activities, including election rigging and extortion, and he uses his political power to further his

own interests. Bhaisaab says,

"Elections are won by money, muscle, and manipulation. We don't have any of these. We have to use our brains."

(Bhardwaj, 2006)

This quote highlights the corrupt and exploitative nature of electoral politics in rural India, where politicians use their power to further their own interests.

Omkaara exposes the social and political realities of rural India, highlighting issues such as caste discrimination and corruption in politics. The film's political undertones make it a powerful commentary on the state of rural India, and the film's characters reflect the complexity of power relations in rural society.

These political undertones in *Omkaara* can be compared to those in *Othello*, highlighting the similarities and differences between the two.

One of the key political undertones in *Othello* is the issue of racism. In the play, *Othello* is a black man who has risen to a position of power and is married to a white woman, Desdemona. His relationship with Desdemona is seen as a threat by the white Venetian society, and he is ultimately brought down by the machinations of his white, male rivals.

In *Omkaara*, the issue of caste takes the place of racism. The character of Langda Tyagi, who is *Othello*'s Iago equivalent, is depicted as a lower-caste man who is envious of the power and privilege enjoyed by the upper-caste *Omkaara*. He uses his cunning and manipulative skills to turn *Omkaara* against his wife, Dolly, and ultimately engineer his downfall.

Another political undertone in both *Omkaara* and *Othello* is the issue of corruption in politics. In *Othello*, the character of Iago is driven by his own ambition and desire for power. He manipulates the other characters to achieve his goals, and ultimately causes chaos and destruction. Similarly, in *Omkaara*, the character of Bhaisaab is a corrupt politician who is involved in criminal activities, including election rigging and extortion.

Nevertheless, while *Othello* deals primarily with issues of racism and individual ambition, *Omkaara* reflects the social and political realities of rural India, highlighting issues such as caste discrimination and corruption in politics. The film's political undertones make it a powerful commentary on the state of rural India, and the film's characters reflect the complexity of power relations in rural society.

While *Omkaara* and *Othello* share some political undertones, the differences between the two

reflect the different social and political contexts in which they were created. Nevertheless, both works demonstrate the enduring relevance of Shakespeare's plays, and the ways in which they continue to speak to contemporary audiences.

BLOOD, MADNESS AND REVENGE – HAIDER

Haider is a movie that explores the complex and volatile political situation in Kashmir during the 1990s, set against the backdrop of Shakespeare's Hamlet. The film portrays the themes of revenge, betrayal, and madness, along with the social and political realities of the region.

One of the significant political undertones in the movie is the issue of state repression and human rights violations. The character of Khurram, who is the equivalent of Hamlet's uncle Claudius, is shown to be working as an informer for the Indian army, betraying his own people in exchange for power and privilege. The following dialogue between Khurram and his associate shows his corrupt and opportunistic nature:

"Hum tohrangmanch ki kathputliyan hain jiskidorussupar wale kehaathonmeinbandhihai. Kab, kaun, kaiseuthega ye koi nahinbataasakta. Haath main aa gayitohkheenchoonga. (We are mere puppets in the hands of the divine, and only he knows when and how he will pull our strings. But if I get a chance, I will grab it with both hands and pull it myself)"

(Bhardwaj, 2014)

Another political undertone in the movie is the issue of identity and nationalism. The film highlights the tensions between the Indian and Kashmiri identities and the challenges faced by the people of Kashmir in defining their own identity.

The film also addresses the issue of the politics of memory and history. The character of Dr. Hilal Meer, who is Haider's father and the equivalent of Hamlet's father, is a poet and scholar who is passionate about preserving Kashmiri culture and history. He is abducted and tortured by the Indian army, and his disappearance becomes a symbol of the violence and oppression faced by the people of Kashmir. The following dialogue between Haider and his mother Ghazala shows the pain and trauma that the family faces due to the situation in the region:

"Haider: KyunDaduaayanahi? (Why hasn't Dadu come back?)

Ghazala: Tumheinkyalagatahai? Ek aamaadmi ki laash se fark padtatahai? (Do you think anyone cares about the death of a common man?)"

(Bhardwaj, 2014)

The film also depicts the complexity of the conflict, with both the Indian state and Kashmiri separatists portrayed as having committed atrocities. The film's climax, which sees Haider killing his uncle, who is an informer for the Indian military, highlights the futility and tragedy of the conflict.

The political undertones in *Haider* are comparable to those in *Hamlet*, the play that the film is adapted from. Both works explore the relationship between the individual and the state and the impact of political conflict on personal relationships. The themes of betrayal, revenge, and the corrupting influence of power are also present in both works.

In *Hamlet*, the titular character is consumed by the desire for revenge against his uncle, who has killed his father and taken the throne. Similarly, in *Haider*, the character of Haider is consumed by the desire for revenge against his uncle, who he believes is an informer for the Indian military responsible for his father's disappearance. Both characters are depicted as being driven to madness and violence by their desire for revenge.

The theme of betrayal is also present in both works. In "Hamlet," the protagonist is betrayed by his mother, who marries his uncle after his father's death. Similarly, in "Haider," the character of Haider is betrayed by his mother, who is having an affair with his uncle. The betrayal by a family member serves to further the sense of personal tragedy in both works.

Furthermore, the corrupting influence of power is a major theme in both works. In "Hamlet," the lust for power drives the characters to commit murder and engage in political intrigue. Similarly, in "Haider," the Indian state's desire to maintain control over Kashmir drives it to engage in brutal tactics, such as torture and enforced disappearances, which in turn leads to the radicalization of the local population.

While "Haider" and "Hamlet" are set in vastly different time periods and cultural contexts, they share common political undertones. Both works explore the impact of political conflict on personal relationships, the desire for revenge, the theme of betrayal, and the corrupting influence of power.

Conclusion

Vishal Bhardwaj's trilogy of Shakespearean adaptations - "*Maqbool*," "*Omkara*," and "*Haider*" - is a unique and powerful exploration of the intersection of politics and personal relationships. By adapting Shakespeare's works to the Indian context, Bhardwaj was able to explore themes that are deeply relevant to the contemporary Indian political scenario.

In each of these films, Bhardwaj masterfully weaves together personal relationships and political conflicts to create works that are both emotionally resonant and politically insightful. By adapting Shakespeare's works to the Indian context, he was able to bring out themes that are deeply relevant to the contemporary Indian political scenario.

On the whole, Bhardwaj's Shakespearean adaptations represent an important contribution to Indian cinema and a powerful exploration of the intersection of politics and personal relationships. They are a testament to the enduring relevance of Shakespeare's works and their ability to resonate with audiences across cultures and time periods.

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