
Literature and Film: Reimaging of Shakespeare's Woman Characters in Indian Cinema

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ABSTRACT

The plays of William Shakespeare have been adapted, reconstructed and reinterpreted throughout the world and Shakespeare came into Indian literary and cultural discourses since the nineteenth century. The representations of Shakespeare's women and the interpretations of the female roles in the cross-cultural narratives have become a topic of great academic interest. The construction of female image in his plays, particularly in his tragedies and comedies, demonstrates the Elizabethan image of woman. At the same time, his plays also echo the English Renaissance stereotypes of genders, their roles and responsibilities towards their society. Shakespeare has influenced Bollywood since its early stage, and the Bard has been utterly absorbed into the imagination of Indian people. My paper deals with three Shakespearean adaptations in Hindi cinema: Vishal Bhardwaj's film *Maqbool* (2004; based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*), *Omkara* (2006; based on *Othello*), and *Haider* (2014, based on *Hamlet*). The focus of my paper will mostly lie in the four female characters - Lady Macbeth, Gertrude, Ophelia and Desdemona and how they are 'reimaged' in Indian Cinema. This paper will analyze how Nimmi/ Lady Macbeth from *Maqbool*, Dolly/Desdemona from *Omkara*, Ghazala/Gertrude and Arshia/Ophelia from *Haider*, assert power, and how they are 'reimaged' in the game of power politics, especially in the socio-

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Kathleen McLuskie writes in her article "Nay, faith, let me not play a woman, I have a beard coming': Women in Shakespeare's Plays" that Shakespeare's women characters are bound by the conventions of female representations to a set of conventional attributes; defined in terms of the associations drawn from the misogynistic or hagiographic conventional wisdom about the women question. And again, she mentions that the process of establishing a woman's character's identity through an implied contrast with womankind works equally well when the character is not demanding sympathy or approval.

Similarly, Sara Ekici writes in her paper "Feminist Criticism: Female Characters in Shakespeare's Plays Othello and Hamlet" that women of Shakespeare's dramas are always bound to follow strict rules and conventions of the patriarchal Elizabethan era, and in Elizabethan England, they are compelled to go into marriages in order to receive power, legacy, in exchange. In Elizabethan time, women were considered as the weaker sex and dangerous, because their sexuality was supposedly mystic and therefore feared by men.

In Indian context, Shakespeare has influenced Bollywood and other narratives since its early stage, and the Bard has been utterly absorbed into the imagination of Indian people. This paper deals with three Shakespearean adaptations in Hindi cinema and one Assamese play: Vishal Bhardwaj's films *Maqbool* (2004; based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*), *Omkaara* (2006; based on *Othello*), *Haider* (2014, based on *Hamlet*), and Himangshu Prasad Das' Assamese play *Lady Macbeth* (Staged; 2017). The focus of this paper will mostly lie on the four female characters - Lady Macbeth, Gertrude, Ophelia, and Desdemona - and how they are reimagined in Indian cinema and Assamese play.

I would like to begin with how Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is reinterpreted in Himangshu Prasad Das' play *Lady Macbeth*. But a radical change is discerned in Das' play *Lady Macbeth* where Das tries to re-interpret Lady Macbeth's character from a complete different perspective. Lady Macbeth's character is reimaged in the game of power politics. Das has shifted the focus from Macbeth to Lady Macbeth in the role of power politics by naming the play *Lady Macbeth*, and thus, focuses more on female role. However, Das' reimaged presentation of Lady Macbeth's character is socially and politically designed as far as the responses of the local audience are concerned.

In Das' play *Lady Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth kills Macbeth by poisoning him and ascends to the throne. Interestingly, the 'throne' that everyone craves for, has been represented in the form of a 'commode' to suggest the transitory nature of power. Das uses a conversation between the witch and Lady Macbeth as a dramatic tool to reflect the inner working of her mind. Lady Macbeth inspires Macbeth to kill Duncan and become the king of Scotland. But Das uses a conversation between Lady Macbeth and her own self as a dramatic tool to reflect her inner desire for power:

"You are so bent on making me king? So deep is your love for me? You'd be queen only because you are my wife? Don't you want to be ruler of the throne with your own capacity?"

In response, Lady Macbeth says: *"The constitution of this country does not confer the right to women to rule from the throne. It's the rule, century-old rule."*

This conversation highlights Lady Macbeth's desire for power and her understanding that it is not feasible for women to rule in a patriarchal society. However, her other self, shown in the form of a witch, is repeatedly reminding her: "Don't you want to be ruler of the throne with your own capacity?" Das' reimaged presentation of Lady Macbeth challenges traditional notions of femininity by depicting her as a powerful and ambitious woman who seizes power despite societal norms. However, Das too cannot come out of conventional notions of an Indian society. He seems to be scared of audience responses at the reimaged *Lady Macbeth*. Indian audience never wants to see a female taking political power and ruling over a patriarchal society. So, keeping the responses of Indian audience in mind, Das finds one solution for that - he kills his female protagonist Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth becomes the sole ruler but cannot live in peace now. She realizes that conspiracy for power will go on till it comes to general public. Her last words reflect that: "A king becomes king because many people accept him so. A king is king because there are many people who listen to his commands."

Moving on to Vishal Bhardwaj's films *Maqbool* (2004; based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*), *Omkaara* (2006; based on *Othello*), *Haider* (2014; based on *Hamlet*), Nimmi/Lady Macbeth from *Maqbool*, Dolly/Desdemona from *Omkaara*, Ghazala/Gertrude and Arshia/Ophelia from *Haider* assert power and are reimaged in the game of power politics, especially in socio-cultural context of India. In Bhardwaj's film *Maqbool* which is set in criminal underworld of Mumbai, Nimmi is represented as Lady Macbeth in *Maqbool*. Unlike wife of great general, Nimmi is shown as mistress of Jahangir Khan, a powerful underworld don.

Poonam Trivedi writes that in film Bhardwaj keeps main features of Lady Macbeth's characterization - her ambition, her use sexuality to good *Maqbool* into taking final step - but makes singular radical change - she is not wife but Duncan/Abbuji's discontented mistress. Bhardwaj attempts to give new image of Lady Macbeth in his film. Culturally and socially constructed image of Nimmi is depicted as using feminine wiles to get her man - *Maqbool*. But Bhardwaj too is conscious of likings as well as sentiments of Indian audience. In one scene Nimmi reacts when Kaka/Banquo says that *Maqbool* has chosen his heroine: "Wo kaun he bhai jishne patthar por poude ura di." She repeatedly asks who is she. She is jealous and asks Abbuji to go to dargah next day. In another scene Nimmi says: "Jhut bol ta he tomara jyotishi Inspector pandit . Abbaji ki jaga tum kabi le nahi sakti. Darpuk ho tum... unki jega Guddu lega." She again says: "Bara til he harama badan me, kaha kaha he, dekho gi." She purposefully injures her foot and *Maqbool* is drawn to her. Nimmi instigates *Maqbool* on another occasion: "Guddu ke pise jib latkake puch hilake dekh nehi sakte hom tumhe – Kishi ek Ko Marna Houga tumhe." The next visual - flowing blood sacrifice animal --is shown in suggestive note that something similar is going to take place.

On another occasion Abbuji along with family members having their meal coughs and feels choked throat. *Maqbool* rushes inside to bring water but inside Nimmi pulls his hand and says: "Aaj kaal tuje Paayas nehi lagte Mian." While another scene shows Nimmi pointing gun towards *Maqbool* forces him to say: "Wapas do Meri Jaan" again and again then she sobs at his bosom again song "Rone Do" comes at backdrop.

These two scenes establish how she uses feminine wiles as well as masculinity aggression to get him. Nimmi carrying feeling betrayal by Abbuji He promised take her world films but instead keeps her mistress.

In conclusion, this paper has examined how Shakespeare's woman characters have been reimagined in Indian cinema and Assamese play. The reimagined characters challenge traditional notions of femininity by depicting them as powerful and ambitious women who seize power despite societal norms. However, they also conform to conventional notions by accepting their secondary role or being killed off ultimately. This paper highlights how Indian filmmakers continue to reimagine Shakespeare's characters while conforming to societal norms.

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Note:

1 The original text refers to Hamlet's words "Sicklied o'er with th' pale cast o' thought".