

From text to screen: Reading Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as a Sexual Tragedy with reference to the play's Indian Adaptaion *Maqbool*

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Abstract:

Macbeth (1623) written by William Shakespeare and its Indian movie adaptation *Maqbool* (2004) directed by Vishal Bhardwaj call into question the sexual identity of the characters depicting both the male and female impotence. Inversion of Gender roles can be detected throughout both works which brings to question the conflicting opinions about Shakespeare's women at that time and how he has been accused of being a misogynist and the image of women in the Indian society being presented in the Indian movie questioning the sexual identity of the three witches and their parallel characters in the movie. There is a correlation in both works between the loss of sexuality and loss of humanity which brings into discussion the theme of inversion and regain of the natural order of things. The paper will further attempt to analyze how language is sexualized in the text through the use of some embedded obscene phrases and expressions especially to show the rampant sexuality presented in the movie.

Keywords: Sexuality, gender, identity, drama.

I. Introduction

Macbeth is a story of no moral scruple or compunction. The gory acts of the play, done in satanic haste, intensified by the gothic thrills of the witches and surreal elements turn this play inwards in the end with guilt, hallucination and madness. For the aim of this study, it would be significant to shed some light on the historical context of the play first then move to describe that of the film. As for Macbeth, Shakespeare has attempted to present a nice picture of King James I as the latter favored him and his men as “the King's Men”. For the sake of the newly-crowned king, Shakespeare had adjusted some of the key historical details of the time. The story was taken from Raphael Hollinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1587) in which the real Duncan was described as an ineffectual young ruler against which both Macbeth and Banquo conspired;

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Macbeth went on to reign for ten years producing many children with his wife whereas the real Banquo is the legendary founder of the Stuart Dynasty of which King James I was the last. Moreover, Shakespeare took into consideration the king's interest in witchcraft that led him to write his book *Daemonology* (1597) to persuade the skeptics of the importance of witchcraft. Thousands of witches were executed afterwards sometimes even for the mere suspicion of practicing witchcraft. In the article "Witchcraft and the Status of Women- the Case of England", the authors, Alan Anderson and Raymond Gordon note that the vast majority of accused witches were women, a fact deserving of study. The use of women as scapegoats, they state, would not have been possible except for a prior belief in the inferiority of women – "that they were weak and therefore more easily swayed by the devil" The writers further state: "the English witchcraft and witch persecution can be attributed to the difficulties involved in translating an image derived from a sexual mythology which saw women as generically inferior and inherently evil into one which could appear credible to a society which saw women in a different light." (27)

It can be observed that sexual frustration is interwoven in the play driving the characters' to commit evil actions in order to confirm their sexual identity. The whole play shows how Macbeth, being unable to perform sexually, tries to satisfy his wife by making her a queen, and thereby brings about their downfall. Macbeth commits homicides as a confirmation of his manhood. Throughout the play, Shakespeare's reflect a set of conflicting opinions about women of his day. Further, Lady Macbeth is portrayed as an Eve figure whose encouragement of her husband leads him to kill the father-like king. In some interpretations, she uses sexuality to convince Macbeth to do the murder the King. Though the play depicts the human nature pushed into the extremes, still Lady Macbeth's character tends to be less destructive than her husband. She is one of the most provocative literary characters, a catalyst whose motives can't be accurately defined. Whether it is just a woman working her best in order to fill the void in her marriage or that, it is the last chance of a woman's frustrated sexual life as implied through the text. Shakespeare's women characters have led some critics to describe him as a misogynist given the fact that ratio of men to women characters tend to be rather imbalanced. Most of his female characters are sensual and apt of committing evil act, even the mother figures in his plays are associated with sexuality unlike the traditional ones like Gertrude, Hamlet's mother who breaks this typical image of motherly tenderness. However, it must be taken into consideration that women were not allowed to act at that time which might be one reason of Shakespeare to be wiser and not to write more female parts in his plays. Vishal Bhardwaj, the director of *Maqbool*, however succeeded in providing an image of women in the Indian underworld of Dons and subjects. In the movie, Nimmi, Lady Macbeth, is Abba Ji's mistress who encourages the man whom she is in love with to murder Abba Ji. The new representation of Lady Macbeth's sexuality is more apparent in the film with Nimmi's sensual pleas to Maqbool, and even the illegitimate affair of theirs. Sexuality seems to be the main drive for Maqbool infact Maqbool's demise can be attributed to his lack of understanding of how to fulfill his repressed sexuality and maintain his relationship. He claims that Nimmi's child is his despite the fact that he knows it's not. The child makes him more secure and re-establishes his relationship with Nimmi.

The film clarifies the theme of violence in *Macbeth* as a means to prove sexual hold on the other partner.

At the beginning of the play, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth feel quite passionately for one another, and Lady Macbeth tend to exploit her sexual hold over Macbeth as a means to persuade him to commit the regicide. However, their shared alienation from the world, occasioned by their partnership in crime, does not bring them closer together, but instead seems to numb their feelings for one another.

The reading of the play *Macbeth* has always drawn attention to the fact that Shakespeare seems to have deliberately chosen to examine what happens when a man or a woman departs from sexual stereotypes. In the case of Lady Macbeth, she pushes her husband for the ultimate act of violence. She is not able to predict the 'manliness' so she will unleash in her husband. The theme of inversion of gender roles in *Macbeth* is as much as connected to the breakdown of the natural order; men being women, women being men ends in a natural gender order again with Lady Macbeth as an enfeebled woman and Lord Macbeth defeated and beheaded by Mucduff. It can be understood here that Shakespeare was mostly interested in the restoration of political order with Malcolm on the throne, the legitimate heir regains his throne which forms a kind of assertion of Macbeth's femininity who is suitable to be in power, nature order again. As for the political order, Macbeth has intruded and reversed the natural political order which he is punished for at the end with Malcolm dethroning him and taking over his legitimate place. Carolyn Asp, in her article "Tragic Action and Sexual Stereotyping in *Macbeth*" traces the stereotypes throughout *Macbeth*, while also discussing that these were Shakespeare's creation for personal exploration and not historically correct. Asp also makes the interesting point that a society that reverses the "manly" quality of violence also suffers for it. Further many critics have argued that the violence in *Macbeth* has a sexual component. There's also a dig at Macbeth's sexual performance at work here because Lady Macbeth implies that Macbeth is afraid his performance of killing the king will be just as weak as his performance in the bedroom (his sexual desire). Nimmi is a masculine and sexually-suppressed mistress who attempts to satisfy her desires through her affair with Maqbool. Maqbool also is dragged into a homicide in order to prove his manhood; he is trying to perform sexually as he is aware of his incompetence to be a Don.

Within the play are there images of sexual innuendo; for example the implications of the repetition of the word "do" have a sense of force to the correlation with sexuality. Indeed, it is noticed that this open term has only been uttered with the female presences, i.e. his wife and the witches motivating him for the regicide. In her book, *Cannibals, Witches, and Divorce: Estranging the Renaissance*, Janet Adelman, has characterized the sexual nature of the witches that is less explicit as 'quasi-sexual'. It seems to be a kind of fantasy of replicating the sterility of their barren bodies; for instance, when talking about the attack on the master of the ship called 'Tiger', they refer to the lines from Act I. scene vii where the witches converse with each other:

FIRST WITCH:

"A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,

And munched, and munched, and munched. "Give me," quoth I.

"Aroint thee, witch!" the rump-fed runnion cries. Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o' th' *Tiger*; But
in a sieve I'll thither sail,

And like a rat without a tail, I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.”(Shakespeare, 35)

These words of the witches stimulate sex; one witch promises “I'll do, and I'll do, and I'll do,” leaving the sailor drained “dry as hay” and impotent with his wife. Such words enhance the sexual interpretation of the play. This interpretation can be further understood while reading Calderwood when she explains in her article “More Than What You Were”: Augmentation and Increase in “Macbeth” notes:

“when Macbeth emerges from the chamber to announce ‘I have done the deed,’ Shakespeare can hardly expect his audience not to register the familiar sexual sense of that expression. Especially not when he has strewn his play with such terms as ‘done,’ ‘deed,’ and ‘do,’ and even provided a Witch who ambitiously asserts ‘I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.’”

Thus, it can be observed that the porter scene serves not only as comic relief but also as another instance of sexual innuendo, providing obvious sexual implications of his utterances; for instance, he remarks that lechery “*provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance,*” (Act ii, Scene iii) which can be also characterized as a kind of sexual humor. This is a reference both to the mental capacity required for sex and the negative effect of alcohol on maintaining an erection. Mary Ann McGrail in her article *Tyranny in Shakespeare* speaks about the scene and explains:

"Is we still incline to forget that sexuality is fundamentally at issue in Macbeth, we are asked to "remember the Porter" and the provoking and unprovoking of sexual desire. (II. iii. 21). In support of his assertion that 'the murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires," Thomas de Quincey in his famous essay "On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth", points to the fact that Lady Macbeth has been "unsexed" and Macbeth "has forgotten that he was born of a woman"- the latter a neat interpretive inversion of the dramatic facts. He attributes their "fiendishness" in part to attempts to escape their own sexuality- Lady Macbeth wishes to be unburdened of her femininity and Macbeth to forget the connection between his masculinity and the feminine process of generation. The movement beyond “human desires” De Quincey describes it an abandonment of sexuality”.(McGrail, 34)

The use of the word “fiend” here by McGrail is important as it suggests a lack of femininity and unnaturalness. Macbeth would not likely be Shakespeare's most sexually charged play, however its Indian adaptation will definitely change the spectators' minds. Maqbool includes many instances of sexual undertones. The most blatant one involves the scene of the intercourse between Nimmi and Mqbool which is not present in the play. Almost all their scenes together are sexual; she touches him romantically trying to seduce him, acting unresponsive and dull in bed with Abba Ji is highly sexual.

Many productions of the play have given the part of Lady Macbeth and a witch to the same actress; some have kept the witches present in all the couple's scenes together; some let all three witches perform Lady Macbeth's part. To her, her sex stands as a barrier to the commission of a crime, such as regicide. She views her sexuality as a root of that “nature” which impedes her ruthlessness; a more direct reference lies in her speech about a specific child in her life. It can be observed in the lines from Act I, Scene vii where she says,

“I have given suck, and know

How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me: I would, while it was smiling in my face,

Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums, And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn

As you have done to this.”

Historically Macbeth was actually the second husband of Lady Macbeth. The first one actually had a son with her before being murdered with the son in a bloody manner. Throughout the play Lady Macbeth seems to allude to such things. The way she talks about her femininity, especially about her woman's breasts “come to my woman's breasts and take my milk for gall” (Act I, Scene v) would make her seem conscious of her unfemininity and an inability to have a child that she asks the spirits to "unsex" her, stripping her of everything that makes her a productive woman. Though no direct statements were eluded of losing children, it can be reasonably assumed that Lady Macbeth lost a child once. Other critics claimed that it was due to losing children in infancy that the Macbeths dedicated themselves to cruelty, and to gain status and power instead. For the sake of power, Lady Macbeth is willing to give up all that is womanly and is ready to be man for both of them. Thus, the sterility is connected to both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth seeking empowerment by escaping sexuality. It is clear to almost all readers that sexual frustration is interwoven in the play in some way or another. The choice to believe in Macbeth as impotent or not is up to the reader.

Bhardwaj's Macbeth is in love, and he supports the illicit entry of his Lady into the language of the screen making him equally guilty. Bergman once said, “Our work in films begins with the human face” (Bergman 54), and Maqbool's face substitutes the whole speech of despair. And before she dies her question echoes, “kya sab gunah tha Mian? Hamara ishq toh poak tha na?”(was it all a sin? Our love was sanctimonious or not?) This question begs an explanation. Is this the fall out of a woman's treading into language? And when finally death comes to Maqbool the chaos is over and the camera too shows what happens to those that challenge patriarchy, the camera pans upside down and ends the saga of a woman's heart.

The implications of the human desires in Macbeth have always been questioned, especially the ones related to sexual identity of the characters. Some have pointed out to the homosexual identity of Lord Macbeth longing for other men while is still married to a woman as an obligation to a political marriage. Homosexuality hence is correlated with his manliness and inability to have an heir with his wife. Macbeth is responsible for the death of more than one child in the play. Given that homosexual men are much less likely to father children. Just as the role of the three witches in Macbeth has been sexualized, the role of the two cops in the Indian Adaptation Maqbool comes to be questioned. Almost no homosexual references were suggested In *Maqbool*, yet the intimacy of the two corrupt cops: Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah who play the corrupt police men might suggest a homosexual relation, more specifically the passing of water together. Moreover,

there is no given information about their marital status which may question their relation as a husband-wife relationship rather than co-workers; however, it might not be performed apparently because there is still no understanding of the psychology of sexuality by the reserved society. Although in India section 377 is removed but unlike other European countries that have legalized same-sex marriages, homosexuality is suppressed and still an alien concept in India. People in the country think of homosexuality as a taboo and it cannot be discussed openly.

In “The Cinematic Apparatus: Problems in Current Theory,” Jacqueline Rose suggests just such a way of thinking identification in the multiple possibilities, pointing to the bisexual disposition of each individual implicit in Freud’s concept of the drives. She says that his essays, “A Child is Being Beaten,” “demonstrates that male and female cannot be assimilated to active and passive and that there is always a potential split between the sexual object and the sexual aim, between the subject and the object of desire” (56). However here the female subject breaks from these overbearing factors to participate in the narrative and true to the play the harbingers of tragedy, the witches portent it.

Thus it can be understood that though it is the most violent play, yet it is the shortest. Brevity of the play should be taken into consideration. But like any other melodrama that offers a modicum of realism yet conforms to the “reconciliation of the irreconcilable” proper to the genre, it must necessarily produce, when dealing with conflicts among women. Both works have provided socially constructed notions of gender and society of their societies. Yet to decide the sexual identity of their characters is up to the readers as sexuality is fundamentally at issue in *Macbeth* and *Maqbool* as well that they depicted how the loss of sexuality can lead to the loss of humanity pushing the human nature into the darkest extremes.

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