

Mourning and Blood-Ties : Macbeth in Mumbai

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Over the last decade or so popular film in India has become imbricated with the contemporary in a way that it has never been before. It has entered the age of images that blur the familiar line between cultural and economic processes. We have witnessed a remarkable proliferation of new cinematic elements, a representational accumulation - though not often emergence of new forms - through this transition. However, one probably didn't suspect that in search of form a generic practice within Bombay cinema, thriving on capturing the new mode of urban existence on the screen, would fall back upon William Shakespeare. Vishal Bharadwaj's *Macbeth*, *Maqbool* (2003), offers a rather startling summing up of the underworld theme developing in Bombay cinema with some persistence over the last decade and a half. It reveals how all that dynamism of survival on the street, the logic of violent justice, the exuberance of life on the brink, the elusive but profound comfort of fraternity that the underworld genre offers, harbour the possibility of a tragic form in the old sense.

In this sense, the urban crime film, developing since *Ankush* (1986) and *Nayakan* (1987) (through *Parinda* 1989, *Angaar* 1992, and *Gardish* 1993, and coming to full bloom in *Satya* 1998) has served as the 'Chronicle' background to Bharadwaj's *Macbeth*. As an early twentieth-century commentator on *Macbeth* said, the author of the Elizabethan play derived 'the tone and atmosphere of the Celtic and primitive legends of violent deeds and haunting remorse' from the Chronicles; 'story after story...told him of men driven by an irresistible impulse into deeds of treachery and bloodshed but haunted when the deed was done by the spectres of conscience and superstition.'^[1] The Chronicles recorded the kingly lineage; one such, Holinshed's Chronicle, was a source of *Macbeth*. The urban crime film has no kings of course, neither has it any lineage to record, but the kingpins are called 'Bhai's. Doesn't this suggest that kinship, the classic material of

tragedy, is latent here? Actually, there are two kinships: direct, and virtual - the provisional kinship of brothers in crime. The other basis of tragic conflict, Law, is of course itself a spectre here. As long as the Bombay film plays out the cop and robber theme, this potential doesn't emerge; but with the underworld genre the battle shifts on to the lawless plane, where one is forced to reflect on the origins of Law. The rules of the underworld themselves present the communal laws that modern legality is supposed to have replaced.

Should we say that it has been possible to cast a set of contemporary popular preoccupations in the mould of Shakespearean tragedy because of the perennial nature of those 'irresistible impulses and haunting remorse', the universal compulsion to return to the origins of law? This would leave unanswered the question of the contemporary itself, the fact that it was in the nineties that this cinema came upon new correspondences with extra-cinematic reality. Let us remember that *Macbeth* slides imperceptibly from a picture of defilement of Nature (the act of treason by Macbeth and the cruelty that followed are presented as a violation of nature) into lamentation over a land. Act IV, Sc. III, Macduff speaking to Malcolm:

.. Each new morn,
New widows howl, new orphans cry; new sorrows
Strike heaven on the face, that it resounds
As if it felt with Scotland, and yell'd out
Like syllable of dolour.

The significant moral shift for *Maqbool* is that one is no longer lamenting the degeneration of a legitimate order, but an order within the underworld. The Mumbai Macbeth violates the law of the criminal regime itself; there is no moral ground above ground, the outside only sends punishment, retribution in the form of the police. The country, the way of life mourned in *Maqbool* is one that has fallen from this fallen state. This, one must admit, has its own poignancy. One has lost other languages of mourning; who would now

arouse interest grieving over the passing of a normative order? The highly moralistic discourse of Indian popular cinema has been forced to make serious concessions in this new genre. Moralism doesn't leave room for tragic apprehension of the world, for which one needs a conflict between two laws, two moralities, as Hegel would say, not a conflict between law and its absence.

My intention here is not to offer an analysis of *Maqbool*, but to see it as a summing up of the underworld theme, to understand through it a generic production that is symptomatic of the post-liberalization popular forms in India. One could begin with some observations on the question of representational accumulation. The most striking aspect of the world in *Satya, Company* (2002) or *Maqbool* is the solidity of evocation. Without this it would be impossible to thematically supplant the legitimate order. The surrealists used to say something similar: you need to make the surreal real, make it appear as the real itself. The fascination of the Bombay underworld is its approximation of reality, the startling proximity that it has to our wakeful reality of the day. The speech, the visage, the humour, the habitat - in short a whole cinematic body has been created for implantation on a range of texts. The semiotic accumulation that supports such density of representation has come from an activity wider than cinema, from a visual culture in which cinema found itself embedded in the nineties. The new visual and sound forms have become visible across the genres, but it is the urban crime film where objects and surfaces have been processed into a special tactility.

It is interesting that the country-city dualism, underlying the old moral tale, a substance characterizing a film like *Agneepath* (1990) for example, has disappeared almost completely. We are trapped inside the city; the extended initiation in violence makes the character an expert user of the city, whose slums and lanes are choreographed into a performance of shock and survival. What does this mean in terms of film language? Primarily, there is a technical mobilization that seeks to create a rapport between the urban sensorium and

the perceptual regime of the film. (In the process, technology itself often rises to the surface as performance.) The city sensorium has incorporated the explosion of commodities in the wake of liberalization through a great semiotic saturation of objects as signs. Moreover, the invasion of commodities on the cityscape and on the extended media site has released a new flow in the image, new modes of sequencing are worked out under the aegis of this dynamism. In an earlier capitalism, the social 'flow' of commodities catalyzed the novelistic narrative imagination; the realist, historical perception of space and time corresponded historically to the itinerary of commodities across spaces. The new density of the image that corresponds to proliferation of commodities reminds us then of the origins of modern realism. The status of the object world became essentially different as commodity production became the dominant instance of production, as exchange value of objects became prevalent over their use value^[2]. Hence, in many ways the new language works through an augmentation of the classic modern modes even as it gets implicated in the current global traffic in images. Its naturalism is fundamentally different from, say, a neorealist film where vision could flow from the sparse everyday objects to the natural horizon with relative ease. A surfeit of objects is offered to the eye. The underworld, seen in this perspective, is a seemingly endless study of faces, gestures, speech and action, built upon the modes of humdrum urban street life and subaltern living made familiar primarily through television. Think of the whole *tapori* repertoire or the slum idiom made visible through music videos, advertisements, reportage, comic interludes. The mimetic capital - to borrow a phrase from the New Historicists - has circulated through an extended cinematic field before cinema could impose a form on it. One requires an initiation in this rhetoric to make full sense of what goes on in a film like *Satya*.

One requires a good education in the language of consumption to follow a film like *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001) too. But *Dil Chahta Hai* chooses not to explore the city; its confident neglect of the non-metropolitan audience is paradoxical

in this sense, but is symptomatic: the young new rich is speaking among themselves here, effectively shrinking the metropolis itself into its white core. On the other hand, the extended family melodrama, synonymous since *Hum Apke Hain Kaun* (1994) with 'Bollywood', is also marked by the mimetic density we have in mind, entirely in service of short circuiting landed property and globalized consumption. One has reason to consider it as a real estate spectacle, a figuring of property as coextensive with the nation itself. This world of goods is bound to suffer from bloodlessness, mourning is a sentiment unknown to it; witness the anesthesia of Sanjay Leela Bhansali creations. The underworld, in its bloody pursuit of money and success, has sometimes presented an obverse of the real as property, owning up to the illegitimacy of property *per se*. In the process, it has also inverted the logic of family ties.

The Bollywood melodrama not only fails to mourn, it fails to acknowledge any lack whatsoever. It is possible to see in it a reversal of the project of the classic melodrama of the fifties and sixties. The romance with modernity in that cinema entailed generational conflict, the couple's struggle to break free from the parental family, the fantasy of conjugal sovereignty. The current imagination of the family drama has a manic investment in erasing all ideological fissures from its domain. It is romance *with* patriarchy: the adventure in love is but fulfilling the mandate of the father. At an advanced stage of its dissolution, the old family is reinvented as the very embodiment of Indian-ness. The role of the diasporic imagination in this is well known. It is of some consequence that another genre of Indian cinema, spawned alongside the family drama, drawing upon similar resources, has created the possibility of working the themes of authority, property and kinship into a less cheerful material.

A source of fascination in the cinematic underworld is the criminal fraternity itself. Ramgopal Varma's *Satya* presented a powerful picture of this bonding, deeply saturated as well as fragile, often ethically strong through its very withdrawal from the moral law. This affective zone, the precarious

community of the killer, becomes a fertile core of performance - sharing of codes, sharing moments of near annihilation, refracting the everyday logic through a highly colourful idiom of exchange. It is interesting to follow the dissolution of actual sibling or parent-child bonding of the earlier examples of the genre, say of *Parinda* or *Gardish*, into the pure invention of a community in *Satya*. Often the nexus, and not the thrill of action, becomes the affective wellspring of the film, its real lure. If the ruthless pursuit of money reveals its violent side here it is in relation to the currency of bonding, its appeal largely deriving from a secret recognition of the impossibility of the legitimate family. This substitute family does not procreate, of course; it is bred to die. Like *Scarface* or *Godfather*, a sister or a daughter turns up sometimes as the impossible bride in the midst of the orgy of death.

Maqbool works the entire range of representations of bonding, the accumulated affects of the generic practice, into a majestic structure. Actual and virtual kinship, transition to new family, provisional community assuming perennial dimensions - all these have been put into the cauldron. Jahangir/Duncan is the Muslim don. Macbeth and he were cousins in Shakespeare; here Jahangir, 'Abbaji' to the gang, is an adoptive father of sorts to Maqbool/Macbeth. Lady Macbeth is Abbaji's young wife, a change that inflects the assassination with parricide. The suggested kinship between Jahangir and Maqbool is actualized through the quasi-incestuous union of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Banquo is a Hindu associate of Abbaji's; and Malcolm, Duncan's son in the original, is made his son. By a simple, felicitous twist, Jahangir's daughter is given in marriage to Guddu/Malcolm. Lady Macbeth instigates Duncan's murder in the film partly because her legitimacy as Jahangir's wife would never be established socially; she remains a mistress performing the wife's role. Also, the marriage between Guddu and her stepdaughter brings about the possibility of real disinheritance of property. The classical motifs of tragedy are processed through melodramatic mediation (one remembers how Walter Benjamin saw a similar reformulation of classical tragedy in the discredited German baroque form of the

Trauerspiel^[3]). The classical tragedy was often preoccupied with the myths of royal investiture. Maqbool's accession to the throne is entirely in keeping with one logic of succession, the logic proper to the underworld (he is the closest aide, second in command). On the other hand, it is a violation of another, equally strong rule of kinship. As a modern tragedy, the film presents the royal investiture of Guddu, the Hindu son-in-law, also as an implicit violation of succession. The establishment of Banquo's line will bring an end to this Muslim empire. Two laws, after all come to a clash.

The witches (after Kurosawa's masterstroke of reducing the three into one with a spinning wheel, here is a charming trick counting them as two rogue policemen, 'Pandit' and 'Purohit') forecast the establishment of Banquo's line on the throne till the end of the world, '*imperium sine fine*'. Shakespeare's own modern formulation of tragedy, demanding a passage from myth into history, demanding an opening of the form into the political real, removed Banquo from the conspiracy against Duncan (in the chronicles he was implicated). What else could he do? Banquo was after all a forefather of James I, his king. In *Maqbool*, the passing of the empire into the hands of Jahangir's Hindu son-in-law, who in the end makes the gesture of adopting Maqbool's son, is deeply resonant with the whole range of generic concerns that we have been trying to locate around the underworld. The Muslim mafia is indeed a deployment of a stereotype, but *Maqbool* reveals the genuine possibilities sometimes thrown up in the circulation of stereotypes. One has seen many instances of the insidious use of Muslim figures like Jahangir in recent Bombay cinema; *Maqbool's* power lies in using the stereotype to free its world from any struggle with a moral opposition. The struggle is located within the world conjured up. The density of details - extending from accent, vocal inflections, gestures to clothes, architecture, food and ritual - lends an almost moving solidity to a mode of community living. Even the *surma* in the eyes of Jahangir contributes to that evocation. Vital links in the plot are worked out through fleeting words and gestures. This would not be possible without the representational accumulation the film feeds off. The underworld

as a counter-mapping of the city, extending from the mansion to the *durgah* to lanes to thoroughfares to the sea borders - comes to overlap with the nexus itself as we are taken through the exposition of the crime enterprise. From its richly saturated independent realm this world opens into the political web through a straightforward reference to Jahangir's command over minority votes and his alliance with the ruling faction, with the king rather than his courtier. The latter's offer of unsettling the state assembly he turns down violently by forcing him to chew one of his *paans*. There is conflict with the forces of law, with a good police officer who suffers at Jahangir's hand, but the real conflict is shifted within Jahangir's world. The sentimental and moralist treatment of the religious stereotype is largely neutralized, clearing ground for a tragic appropriation of the motif of corruption. The *paan* chewing don's gruff voice betrays an inner sickness; his gait, slowed down by flab, his concupiscence, is marked by a sense of the decay of flesh. The creative adventure with the stereotype produces the striking innovation of the scene of drinking at Jahangir's daughter's wedding, on the night of his murder. The don forces his devout personal bodyguard, Usman, to first show the bullet marks on his bare body, signs of his fierce loyalty to his master, and then makes him drink against his will, incapacitating him before the coming assassin.

His empire is in decline, the modern kid Guddu will inherit the mantle; but before that, in the interregnum of Maqbool's rule, a different code of the underworld will take hold, a code that Jahangir detested. He turned down the hugely lucrative deal of smuggling in material that would be used for mayhem in the land. 'This is my country, where can I go leaving it?' - as Jahangir says this to his associates, the aura of the past is cast over his whole reality. This is the fascinating aspect of the hard detailing of the contemporary in the film. The new mimetic competence, an inheritance of the media, is now inflected into a cinematic articulation. At the generic level, the evocation here is that of the poetic world of the Muslim *Social*, always marked by nostalgia. What object is being smuggled in? The film doesn't

name it. In this unnamed thing the cursed Maqbool will deal, bringing the Ocean to his doorstep (the Birnam wood to the High Dunsinane); the coast guard will invade his home moments before he is killed.

Violence is inseparable from the solidity of the flow of life just beneath the surface of legitimate social reality. The thick, close registration of an idiom of living is drawn from a mediatic activity where the familiar distinction between economic and cultural production is getting increasingly obliterated. *Maqbool*, summing up the obsessions of a genre, offers a prism of reflection on the new economic production of images. It can do so because it has sought to deflect the mediatic effects into a cinematic form in the old sense, in the sense in which the vibrantly detailed contemporary, the flip side of the present city, can be coloured with a sense of passing into the past. One suspects, forgetting that quality of past-ness as a 'cinematic' take on the world would make it impossible to cast this whole current obsession into a mould borrowed from Elizabethan tragedy.

References:

[1](#) Herbert Grierson, 1914, cited in Kenneth Muir, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir, London, 1962.

[2](#) Fredric Jameson argued the necessity to re-think the dialectics of form in relation to this empirical condition in his *Marxism and Form, Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, Princeton, 1971, pp 391-393.

[3](#) In Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London and New York, 1985.