

ROLE OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY FROM PAGE TO THE SCREEN

Dr. Anupam Soni

Professor,

Department of English,

Bundelkhand College, Jhansi (U.P.)

Abstract

William Shakespeare has a great impact on the theatres and plays of the entire world. His plays present a lively and realistic interpretation of the relationship between men and women. Shakespeare became one of the best dramatists when England was flourishing under the reign of Queen Elizabeth who loved literature and encouraged literary activities. At that time, the Elizabethan era was witnessing a great transition, especially for women. Despite having a female monarch, the role and characterization of women during that time were dehumanizing. Women were recognized as inferiors in a male-dominated society. During Shakespeare's time, women did not enjoy social, political and economical parity with men. Shakespeare presented female characters playing a very crucial role in his plays, especially in his tragedies i.e. Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth. However, it is noteworthy that there has been a lot of research on Shakespeare's tragic heroes but the female characters despite their centrality in the tragedies remain sidelined in academia. In modern times, Vishal Bhardwaj has delineated Shakespeare's female characters in his adapted trilogy Maqbool, Omkara and Haider from a different angle. Bhardwaj has skillfully portrayed the female protagonists of Shakespeare's tragedies in a very microscopic way. He has given Shakespeare's tragic heroines more empowered status and active roles in his worldwide acclaimed Shakespearean trilogy. This paper comparatively analyzes how Shakespeare's 16th-century tragic heroines are transformed and presented on the 21st-century cinema screen.

Keywords: Adapted movies; Elizabethan; Female characters; Shakespeare's plays; Transformation.

Introduction

William Shakespeare has a great influence on the theatre and plays of the entire world. His plays present a lively interpretation of the relationship between men and women. Shakespeare became one of the best dramatists when England was flourishing under the reign of Queen Elizabeth who loved literature and encouraged literary activities. At that time the Elizabethan era was witnessing a great transition, especially for women. Despite having a female monarch, the role and characterization of women during that time were dehumanizing. At that time all forms of authority were given to men except the most important of all, the kingship of England. Montrose elaborates on the point "with one vital exception, all forms of public and domestic authority in Elizabethan England were vested in men: in fathers, husbands, masters, teachers, lords, magistrates." (Montrose 65) Women were recognized as inferiors in the male-dominated society. During Shakespeare's time,

women did not enjoy social, political and economical parity with men. In his plays, especially in his tragedies i.e. *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, Shakespeare presented female characters playing a very crucial role. Shakespeare does not present a traditional female character but creates a new woman who is beautiful, intelligent, independent and equivalent to men.

It is noteworthy that there has been a lot of work in the study of Shakespeare's tragic heroes but not much in the study of tragic heroines. The main reason behind it is that women are assigned prominent roles in his comedies but they remain subservient in his tragedies. His attitude towards female characters reflects his bipolar approach to comedies and tragedies. It was in the late nineteenth century that John Ruskin made a seminal observation that Shakespeare has no heroes but only heroines in his comedies. Shakespeare is said to be a feminist in his comedies but in his tragedies, the central figure is ascribed only to male characters. In Shakespeare's tragedies, we come across several types of female characters who directly or indirectly influence the actions of male protagonists. Though they serve a subordinate part, they are requisite and more relevant to the greatness of tragedies. According to some critics, tragedy is the outcome of the tragic actions of the hero but there is something hidden behind the truth. Another truth is that females are the cause of the ruin in the life of tragic heroes; especially Lady Macbeth and Gertrude are responsible for the tragedy in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*.

In Bollywood films, Vishal Bhardwaj has delineated Shakespeare's female characters in his adapted trilogy *Maqbool*, *Omkara* and *Haider* through a different angle. Bhardwaj's portrayal of female characters along with the male ones has a perfect correspondence between the movie and the play. He has skillfully reinvented the female protagonists of Shakespeare's tragedies in a very microscopic way. Remarkably, he has given Shakespeare's tragic heroines more empowered and active roles in his worldwide acclaimed movies. He took special care in presenting modern female counterparts of Shakespeare's tragic heroines in his movies based on Shakespeare's great tragedies: Nimmi as Lady Macbeth in *Maqbool*, an adaptation of *Macbeth*; Dolly as Desdemona, Indu as Emilia and Billo as Bianca in *Omkara*, an adaptation of *Othello*; Ghajala as Gertrude and Arshia as Ophelia in *Haider*, an adaptation of *Hamlet*. The present article discusses Shakespeare's tragic heroines on the Elizabethan stage on the twenty-first-century Indian cinema screen:

Shakespeare's Female Characters of *Macbeth* in the Movie *Maqbool*

Macbeth is the last and the shortest of Shakespeare's four great tragedies. This fast-moving tragedy is about Macbeth's vaulting ambition and Lady Macbeth's provocation for supremacy which leads her to a turbulent state of insanity and tragic death. *Maqbool*, an adaptation of *Macbeth*, is the initial step of Bhardwaj's worldwide acclaimed adaptations of Shakespeare's great tragedies.

Maqbool, released in 2003, is the first part of Bhardwaj's Shakespearean trilogy. It is set in the criminal background of the Mumbai underworld. Bhardwaj transformed the sixteenth-century characters of the play into present-day Mumbai. In the movie, Nimmi as Lady Macbeth performs the most questioning role of Nimmi and nowhere in the movie, she is overshadowed by her male counterparts. In the movie, Tabu in the role of Nimmi excelled the character of Lady Macbeth.

If we analyze the character of Nimmi in the movie, we find that she is not depicted as a typical idealistic type of Bollywood heroine. Bhardwaj has presented the figure of Lady Macbeth with a dual personality: as the mistress of a powerful underworld don Abba Ji (King Duncan) and as the beloved of Maqbool (Macbeth). She is a combination of virtue and vice as a normal human being. Bhardwaj represents Lady Macbeth in the form of Nimmi giving voice to the spirit and attitude of a new woman. Nimmi knows how to use her sexuality to manipulate the protagonist and achieve what she wants. In an interview, Bhardwaj and the scriptwriter Tyrewala clarified the reason for changes made in the role of Lady Macbeth for the requirement of the plot, “The major decision was to change the character of Lady Macbeth from Macbeth’s wife to Duncan’s mistress who was having an affair with Macbeth. This changed the dynamics of the relationships completely. Suddenly the sexual conflict became the core of the screenplay. For Macbeth, the lady Macbeth became the throne herself.”(Bhardwaj)

Nimmi is trapped in an endless depth of psycho-bottom. She is deeply frustrated to live as the mistress of Abba Ji who is about her father’s age. She wants to have Maqbool at any cost and it brings a major change in her role from that of Lady Macbeth in the play. Unlike Lady Macbeth, she incites Maqbool to murder Abba Ji not due to her ambition for power but due to her love for Maqbool because she is already in power being the mistress of Abba ji. She is schematic like Lady Macbeth who kills the guards of King Duncan to make them responsible for the murder. Both the females’ Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* and Nimmi in *Maqbool* represent themselves as daring fiends before their chicken-hearted husband/lover. Their dominating personality empowers the hero to commit the crime. They deliberately manipulate their husbands by raising insecurity in their minds and doing away with people who come in their way. In the original text, witches prompt Macbeth toward the ghastly act of murdering Duncan. In Bhardwaj’s *Maqbool*, Nimmi dislikes being warm to “repulsively fat body, whenever she is in bed with him, she looks uninvolved and keeps looking blankly.” (Bhardwaj and Tyrewala) Maqbool remains unmoved towards Nimmi’s seductions in the first place but fails to maintain his position in the face of her evil beauty in the long run. She had always wished to be in Maqbool’s arms and finally became successful in winning him. The story of *Maqbool* deviates from that of *Macbeth*’s as in the original text, Lady Macbeth and Macbeth shared a sacred relationship, guided through the holy rituals. The adaptation depicts a forbidden romance by turning the relationships upside down.

Bhardwaj wonderfully sets Nimmi in the same condition of mental instability and remorse as Lady Macbeth suffered in the play. Like Lady Macbeth, Nimmi also suffers from sleepwalking. She hallucinates by seeing blood on her face and walls and behaves like a mad woman. She dies pathetically while uttering her crime remorsefully. Her mental disorder is highlighted when she says: “The stench of blood is everywhere.....I have to clean up. I won’t be able to sleep otherwise” (Bhardwaj and Tyrewala 129-130). Mondal uses a powerful disturbing image in depicting the pitiable condition of both ladies: “They are emptied of all strength to the point that they have nothing left to contribute to the narrative: a sterile empty shell for a body and devastated mind unable to cohabit any longer with sanity (Mondal 5).

Like Lady Macbeth, Nimmi becomes a neurotic and miserable creature who dies pathetically. However, Bhardwaj does not make her cruel like Lady Macbeth that she can kill her baby if she had sworn it:

“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 plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dashed the brains out, had I sworn as you
Have done this” (I, viii).

Nimmi is happy to know about her pregnancy and gives birth to the baby. Though the movie depicts grey shades of Lady Macbeth’s character in her role, her remorse and tragic end drag the sympathy of spectators. Unlike Lady Macbeth, she is presented as a victim of underworld activities. She came from Lucknow to Mumbai to become a film actress but is cheated on by Abba Ji and finally becomes his mistress as she had no option left for herself. In this way, Bhardwaj diverts from the source character of the play and depicts the condition of many girls who come to Mumbai with a dream of becoming an actress but are exploited there. In some points, Nimmi cannot be equated with Lady Macbeth as Nimmi instigated Maqbool to kill Abba Ji not to get the power and supremacy but to come out of her present condition as the mistress of an overaged underworld dons. Nimmi is portrayed as the victim of a hateful underworld don, who desperately needs another male gangster to rescue her.

Shakespeare’s Female Characters of *Othello* in the Movie *Omkara*

The international success of the adaptation of *Macbeth* as *Maqbool* inspired Vishal Bhardwaj to adapt *Othello* as *Omkara* in 2006. In *Omkara*, the link with Shakespeare’s *Othello* is more explicit than that of *Maqbool*. Unlike Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Bhardwaj has given more significant and active roles to the female characters in the movie. Bhardwaj presents the character of Dolly with the same innocence, purity, beauty and dignity as Desdemona is depicted in the play. Desdemona is one of the most pathetic, innocent and silent sufferers of Shakespeare’s tragic heroines. A.C. Bradley compares her character with other Shakespeare heroines, “She is the most pathetic of Shakespeare’s women, as innocent as Miranda and as loving as Viola, yet suffering more deeply than Cordelia or Imogen and she seems to lack that independence and strength of spirit which Cordelia and Imogen possess, and which in a manner raises them above suffering” (Bradley 169).

The simplicity, innocence and tenderness of Desdemona and Dolly make them easy tools for Iago/Langada. Like Desdemona, Dolly elopes with Omkara and decides to marry him. Thus, Desdemona was a rebel as she did what was not acceptable in Elizabethan society; Dolly also rebelled by eloping and marrying Omkara because the Indian social structure doesn’t accept such marriages even today. The play shows that Desdemona, despite being very, breaks the cultural canons of Elizabethan society by confessing her love for Othello before the Duke, her father and others; the movie shows Dolly, despite being engaged with another person of her father’s choice, challenges the conservative rules of a male-dominated society by asserting her love for Omkarabefore Bhaisaab (Duke), her father and others. Her confession of love echoes the frankness of Desdemona in the play: “I’ve always followed the tune of my heart.....Dad....please forgive me....I can’t live without Omkara” (Bhardwaj et al 23-24).

Dolly is portrayed as tactless as Desdemona that's why she is easily manipulated by Langada in fulfilling his evil design of taking revenge on Othello. Bhardwaj presents Dolly as less active and more submissive than Desdemona. Desdemona protests her husband's accusations of having illicit relations with Cassio but Dolly remains quiet when Omkara accuses her of adultery and dies in tears without any complaint.

Both Desdemona and Dolly become victims of their deep love and suffer suspicion, abuse and harsh treatment by their husbands for whom they had left their family. They become passive and die defenceless without proving their fidelity to their husbands. The tragic fate and brutal murder of Desdemona in the play and Dolly in the movie remind us of the tragic fate of Browning's heroines in *Porphyria's Lover* and *My Last Duchess*, whose lives are taken away by their lover and husband.

In the movie, Emilia is re-imagined as Indu who is more empowered than her source character. She is created not merely as Emilia's analogue but as a fully recognized Indian woman. A more acute change occurs in her role as she is presented as an affiliated sister of Omkara and shares a special bond of affection with him. Unlike Emilia, she plays an integral part in the action of the film. Bhardwaj presents Indu as a typical housewife who follows her husband but she can't bear injustice done to Desdemona like Emilia who only curses her husband and dies by his hands. In the movie, Indu takes a firm stand against her husband when she comes to know that her husband played an important role in Dolly's death by poisoning Omkara's mind and she also has her inadvertent role by stealing Dolly's waistband. She is so enraged at the injustice of events that she kills her husband and retributes the order of justice. This action of Indu in the movie overshadows the role of Emilia on whom her character is based. It makes her role "the instrument of justice and moral retribution, something which has been found lacking in Shakespeare's ending." (Trivedi, 33) Stephen Alter also explains this transformation in the character of Indu in the movie, "Probably the greatest plot change from *Othello* to *Omkara* is Emilia's role. In the play, she curses her husband when she discovers what Iago has done, but Vishal takes her response a step further. Knowing that Langada has destroyed the lives of those she loves, Indu picks up a sickle and kills him with a single stroke. Konkana's high-spirited village housewife is transformed into a vindictive goddess, a figure out of Hindu mythology rather than Elizabethan melodrama (Alter 223).

This quick transformation in the role of Indu from a typical wife to an avenging woman establishes her in the category of avenging female characters in Hindi cinema like the memorable role of Radha in the movie *Mother India*. In the words of Mike Heidenberg: "In this last role, Indu assumes prominence that Emilia lacks in *Othello*. The fact that she is avenging the family honour of both sides of her family, further, casts her as the film's heroine" (Heidenberg 100).

Shakespeare's female Characters of *Hamlet* in the movie *Haider*

Hamlet is the first and the longest in the quadrangle of Shakespeare's great tragedies: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. It is considered to be the most popular and the most produced play of Shakespeare after *Romeo and Juliet*. *Hamlet* adapted as *Haider* completes Vishal Bhardwaj's adapted trilogy on Shakespeare's great tragedies. *Haider* is set in Kashmir during the insurgency movement in 1995 which

gives the filmmaker ample opportunity to bring female characters to life in an area of extended violence.

In the movie *Haider*, the role of Gertrude is beautifully reinvented as Ghazala, a charming woman in her forties but she is always seen with sad eyes. Bhardwaj brings a major change in the role of Gertrude/Ghajala by making her the centre of the movie. Ghazala is presented so powerfully that she overrules the protagonist as the story largely revolves around her. Rachel Saltz remarks: "Instead of *Haider*, the director Vishal Bhardwaj might have considered calling his fast-loose adaptation of "*Hamlet*" "*Ghajala*" after its Gertrude character....[she] has such depth and mystery that she hijacks the movie" (qt. in Trivedi "Woman as Avengers" 36).

The character of Gertrude is a very complex and puzzling one in the play. She has been misunderstood and underestimated by critics for centuries. Though there is no textual evidence of Gertrude being an ally in her husband's murder, she has been maligned for frailty, concupiscence and murder of her husband. A.C. Bradley doesn't find her role in her husband's death as he says: "The queen was not a bad-hearted woman, not at all the woman to think little of murder" (Bradley 135). The movie shows Ghajala an ignorant accomplice of Khurram/Claudius in the murder of her husband. Her ignorance of Khurram's treacherous nature and information about the hiding of a terrorist in her house provides an opportunity for Khurram to get his brother arrested by the Indian army. Later on, he gets his brother murdered and removes him from his way to snatch his wife. Thus, Ghazala, unlike Gertrude, unwittingly becomes the instrument of violence in the movie.

Like Queen Gertrude, Ghajala's married life was not happy and satisfactory as her former husband was always busy in his medical practices and devoted himself to his patients and hospital. She tells Haider about her unsatisfied married life: how the gap between her and his father began to increase day by day when Haider went to Aligarh to study. Both Gertrude and Ghazala have one thing very common and that is their deep love and affection for their sons. As the play depicts that Gertrude almost lives by Hamlet's looks, Ghajala also had little reason to live but only for Haider " (Bhardwaj 91).

The movie presents Ghajala as more active and confident than Gertrude who exerts little influence in the play. Queen Gertrude's role is limited to a few lines and scenes in the text but Ghajala outshines the movie from the beginning to the end. She is an independent lady who wants to take the decisions of her life by herself. After the disappearance of her husband, Ghajala doesn't accept living in the status of 'half-widow' (the wives of disappeared people in Kashmir were called half-widows because they were uncertain of whether their husbands were alive or dead). She frankly expresses her desire to 'become whole' i.e. not to live as the widow of her husband but to marry Khurram. Its clear indication is found when Khurram asks her to join school again, she replies "once I become whole....I am partly a widow and partly a bride" (Bhardwaj and Peer 133-134).

Ghajala's role is dramatically transformed in the closing scene of the movie. She doesn't die like Queen Gertrude by ignorantly consuming a poisonous drink but she tries to stop the cycle of vengeance by becoming a human bomb and ending her life in a much unforeseen way. When she loses all her hope to make her son surrender and save his life, she chooses to become a suicide bomb and kills herself. Through this act of sacrifice, she wants to restore peace and humanity as she considers herself

responsible for all the violence and tragedy. She repeats the message ‘revenge begets only revenge’ quite contrary to the play, many times in the movie. Poonam Trivedi alludes to Ghajala’s role as a female suicide bomber to Dhanu, the assassin of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (1991). In Bollywood cinema, there are references to female suicide bombers in some movies: Megha in Maniratnam’s *Dil Se* (1998) and Malli in Santosh Sivan’s *The Terrorist* (1999) also turn into suicide bombers. Trivedi tells about the character of Ghazala in *Haider*: “from a typical Bollywood mother, making a last-ditch attempt to extricate her son from the morass of violence and revenge that he has fallen into, she is also, like Indu in *Omkaara*, a Shakti figure who can suddenly stand tall and resolute” (Trivedi “Woman as Avenger” 38).

The movie majorly departs from the original play in reinventing Ophelia's character as Arshia. The role of Hamlet’s friend and confidant Horatio is merged into her personality. Though her role is transfigured from the original character of Ophelia, she retains the same beauty, innocence and love for Haider in her essential core as Ophelia had. In the movie, Bhardwaj gives her all the agency that Ophelia never had: she is an active journalist and helps Haider in search of his father in army camps, hospitals, prisons and detention centres.

Unlike Ophelia who is a submissive girl, Arshia is represented as a modern girl who is confident enough to take important decisions in her life. Ophelia obeys her father’s restrictions on visiting Hamlet but Arshia shows her free will and disregards her father and brother’s impositions on her private life when they persuade her to remain away from Haider. But at the end of the movie, she is completely changed from what she was in the beginning. After the death of her father and the desertion of Haider, she is emotionally shattered and loses the previous glory of her role. Arshia, like Ophelia, becomes mad due to unbearable grief and ends her life pathetically. Poonam Trivedi finds similarity in the tragic fate of Ophelia and Arshia: “It is pernicious corruption, political and patriarchal, the ‘rotten’ in the world of her father, and her brother, a multinational jobber, which kicks in, controls and finally crushes her.....Arshia though physically protective and supportive ends like Ophelia, a victim of circumstances” (Trivedi “Woman as Avenger” 40).

Conclusion

It is curious to note that in the above-discussed Shakespearean tragedies and adapted movies, female characters act as catalysts for the disaster of male characters. Though they are assigned secondary roles to their male counterparts, they are used as an important instrument in building up tragic elements. If we look into the character of Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* and Gertrude in *Hamlet*, we find them as the main causes of tragedies in the life of tragic heroes. However, the guiltless and pathetic death of Desdemona in *Othello* and Ophelia in *Hamlet* cannot be ignored. Most of Shakespeare’s tragic heroines are victims of forces which are beyond their control. They struggle for power and defend their honour.

In his adapted trilogy Vishal Bhardwaj gives Shakespeare’s tragic heroines an essence which makes them not only essential to the tragedy but also unique in representation. It is important to note that the above-mentioned female characters undergo a significant transformation when they are shifted from the text to the screen. It is since the function of onscreen media is entirely different from that of print media. In his adapted trilogy, Bhardwaj places the female characters at the centre of the movie and allows them to appropriate and challenge male power structures.

Bhardwaj has given a more empowered voice and active role to his female characters than their original counterparts in the play. Poonam Trivedi opines on tragic heroines in Bhardwaj's Shakespearean trilogy: "..... Women show the way, creating areas of nurturance, regeneration and conflict resolution, or summary justice, in the end, as the way forward. Vishal Bhardwaj's moral/spiritual and political arc resonates with aspects of Indian philosophy/mythology which reserves a stronger, more proactive potency for the female principle than the familiar western Aristotelian division of male reason versus female nature." (Trivedi 41)

Works Cited

1. Alter, Stephen. *Going for Take: The Making of Omkara and Other Encounters in Bollywood*. India: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014. Print
2. Bhardwaj, Vishal and Basharat, Peer. *Haider: The Original Screenplay with English Translation*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2014.
3. Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. ABS Publishers, India. 2011.
4. Heidenberg, Mike. "No Country for Young Women: Empowering Emilia in Vishal Bhardwaj's Omkara." *Bollywood Shakespeare*, edited by Craig Dionne and Parmita Kapadia, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
5. Mondal, Subarna. "All the King's Men and the King's Women: Reading Vishal Bhardwaj's Maqbool as a creative Mistranslation of Shakespeare's Macbeth." *Palgrave Communications*, Article No. 17002, 2017. <<http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract=2913519>>
6. Montrose, Louis Adrian. "Shaping Fantasies: Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture." *Representations* 2.1 1983. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928384>>
7. Trivedi, Poonam. "Woman as Avenger; Indiasining the Shakespearean Tragic in the Films of Vishal Bhardwaj." *Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas: Local Habitations*, edited by Poonam Trivedi and ParomitaChakravarti, Routledge, 2019.

-----***-----