

There is Order Here, Very Faint, Very Human: Vishal Bhardwaj's Art of Cinematic Narrative

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Abstract: Every film in some way or the other bears the director's perspective. Most of the popular or commercial films are a blend of popular trends called 'masala movies' presenting the mixture of romance, comedy, action, songs, dance numbers, laughter and tears. If these films are closely examined they have similar skeleton structure with minor variations: they hardly have a perspective that can hold the film together or may reveal a point of view. Therefore, there are not many films that bear a clear signature of the filmmaker. Both in the West and in the East, there are only a few directors whose films bear a distinctly visible imprint of their vision. Shakespeare's plays present both a combination of popular appeal and psychological depth that can be exploited in multiple ways, right from the basic presentation of the story to taking it to a deeper exploration of human psyche and relationships. A lot has been said about the universality of Shakespeare's stories. In fact, they were not exactly his own but the manner in which he adapted them into his plays carries a strong universal element and hence comes the broad scope of the adaptation of his plays in all times and all spaces. This paper examines how an auteurist filmmaker like Vishal Bhardwaj approaches Shakespeare's plays from a certain standpoint or vantage point; it might not be predetermined but may emerge after he has gone through the story. This vantage point becomes central to the treatment of the story in his entire film. It is the thread that connects every part of the film like a thread holding together all the beads in a rosary.

Key words:- Adaptation, perspective, exploration, universality, relationships

The opening scenes of all the three films; *Haider*, *Maqbool* and *Omkaara* that are cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare's plays *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello*, reveal a pattern of how Bhardwaj gradually builds up and sets up the tone of his films. In fact, he introduces multiple layers that may appear random but gradually there emerges an unmistakable order. For instance, *Maqbool* opens with the scene of heavy rain splattering and someone's finger drawing a figure on the wet wind sheet of a police jeep. Then inside of the jeep is shown with the half face of Inspector Purohit toying with his service revolver and cracking jokes with an arrested man. While Inspector Pandit's back is shown who claims to be drawing the horoscope of Mumbai. Inspector Purohit asks him who will be the king of Mumbai, whether Abba ji or Mughal. To this, Inspector Pandit replies, —"Miyān Maqbool" in a mysterious way and the scene shifts to a close up of Maqbool. This opening hardly lasts for four minutes twenty two seconds but it does reveal many things. First, it introduces a heavy rain, a characteristic so closely attached to Mumbai, the night itself is symbolic of the darkness that prevails in the underworld and the strange nexus of the police and the

criminals. Whereby, the fate of individuals completely hangs on chance. The dark humour of referring to somebody's encounter by Inspector Purohit and the confused state of the stressed man, alongside Inspector Purohit's consistent playing with his revolver and Inspector Pandit remaining unaffected and drawing the horoscope of Mumbai: this few minute scene almost introduces all the elements that prevail in the film and set the pace for the rest of the film. The introduction of Maqbool through a close up of his face with closed eyes is different from how heroes are introduced in Bollywood films. There is nothing grand about the introduction of Maqbool but on the contrary it's very subtle and the entire mystery, darkness and the suspense created in the opening scene appear to culminate in the figure of Maqbool.

Omkaara opens with a black screen and a voice over dialogue which is abusive and spoken with an accent typical to Uttar Pradesh.

V/O

bewkoof aur chutiya me dhage bhar ka farak hota heiga bhaiya... dhaage ke inge bewakoof aur unge chutiya... aur jo dhaaga hinch lo... toh kon bewakoof aur kon chutiya... karod

rupiye ka prashan hai bhaiya...

(There's a thin line separating a moron from a fucking idiot... on one end of the line lies the moron and on the other, the fucking idiot... snap the line and you don't know who's who... therein lies the million dollar question, my pretty polly.) (Bhardwaj, et al, 01)

The camera zooms into the face of Langda Tyagi while he attempts to look through the sehra of Rajju who is all set to get married to Dolly. Interestingly enough, unlike *Maqbool*, in *Omkara* the antagonist, Langda Tyagi appears first. It's a long shot that reveals the rugged region of Uttar Pradesh, with hillocks and dusty roads. Langda Tyagi's outfit and language completely match with the space. He looks raw, rough, and very casual with his tobacco stained teeth and frequent spitting. Talking casually to Rajju, he takes out his gun and shoots the tyre of the bus that is carrying Rajju's baraat. Earlier Rajju thinks that it's all a joke but shooting of the tyre shocks him into the realization that Langda Tyagi means business. As he hurries off on a moped, a long shot is shown where Langda Tyagi sees him hurrying on a dusty road with a hand on his forehead to avoid sunlight and spits again. This small scene again has multiple implications. It establishes the rugged nature of the space and the people in which drama would unfold. It also is shown as a very casual act. In fact, this projection of the violence carries throughout the film and becomes the identifying characteristic of the kind of life lived in that particular region of Uttar Pradesh.

The opening of *Haider* is another case in point. It opens with the sounds of heavy boots and closes into a group of Kashmiris hurrying across some narrow streets. There is a feeling of urgency and fear and the scene shifts to a room where a commander of militants is suffering with appendicitis. His comrades have brought doctor Hilaal Mir to treat him. The doctor informs them that his condition is critical and he needs to be taken to the hospital. The militants are hesitant to do so because of the army roadblocks everywhere.

This whole sequence has multiple layers. Dr. Hilaal is not exactly a terrorist sympathiser, brings them home for treatment. Ghazala asked the students the meaning of home and house. Although the definition of 'home' is given by the students and Ghazala, the question of 'house' remains unanswered. Ghazala's concern and doctor's faith in protecting life are the two poles

between which conflicts of safety, survival, duty and allegiance interact and intersect each other. The central conflict is how 'homes' are fast vanishing from Kashmir and are being reduced to houses. It is the entry of the political into the personal where the political has made deep inroads in the personal and there are no defining lines where the political ends and the personal begins. Not only Kashmir but the people, their way of life, their beliefs and the simple desire to stay sane and human has been turned inside out. Nothing remains private and the balance between the personal and the political remains highly volatile as individuals struggle to survive. Therefore, the opening of the film powerfully introduces the narrative thread that determines the treatment of the rest of the film.

Narratology in films is quite different from the narrative in novels. Like the Victorian novels the eye of the camera becomes the omniscient narrator and is reflected on the camera screen. In both modern and postmodern narratives, a lot of experimentation has taken place at the level of narrative. Vishal Bhardwaj makes some interesting experiments with narrative in his films. There are no single narrators or singular perspectives. In *Maqbool*, the two policemen play a crucial role in the narrative. In *Omkara*, Langda Tyagi and in *Haider*, Ruhadaar hold important clues to how the narrative will unfold. However, at the centre of Bhardwaj's storytelling lies the phenomenon of space. Space, geographical, socio-political and cultural, remains at the centre of the narrative from which each narrative thread of his films emerges and into which it culminates. This also sets the tone for his films. In the sense that they have a pervasive environment that prevails in the entire film and influences each of the scenes. In *Maqbool*, a foreboding darkness prevails throughout the film and the narrative carries it in different forms. If looked at in terms of light and darkness there is an abundance of half lit and unlit scenes, silhouettes and shadows. This brings out the darkness, treachery, deceit, violence and uncertainty that permeate the underworld projected in the film. This has an impact on the story, the characters, the events and even the dialogues. The underworld has been projected in multiple ways in Indian cinema and more often than not it is glamorised and the underworld dons are idealised in a way that might not only make the film popular but project the underworld

as full of thrill, excitement and bravado. Vishal Bhardwaj's treatment of this underworld lies in contrast to the popular projection. His treatment is more subtle, realistic and focused on the menacing nature of the underworld, its pitfalls and grime behind glamour. He presents it in all its casualness deprived of most of the bravery or glamour commonly associated with it. The tone of darkness and greyness in the film seeps into the romantic scenes as well with an ever present possibility of violence. There is the scene where Nimmi is speaking to Abba ji over phone very coquettishly demanding a new dress for her while Maqbool watches her and this happens in the backdrop of Abba ji's grand farm house. Nimmi intends to make Maqbool jealous and she succeeds as well because as soon as she disconnects the phone Maqbool says angrily to her that he will cut her throat. And she says that he can very well do that at night. *Maqbool* comes quite close to the rendition of Duncan's murder in *Macbeth* but in its own characteristic manner. Inspector Pandit prophesies that it will rain tonight without any sign of rain in the sky. While everyone eats and drinks, However, in the last few scenes leading to the death of Maqbool, Bhardwaj provides a major twist to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In *Macbeth*, *Macbeth's* fall is complete without any element or hope for redemption. It has to be kept in the mind here that the love relationship between Maqbool and Nimmi has nothing directly to do with *Macbeth's* story. Bhardwaj handles the two narratives of the love story and that of the fall of a gangster very carefully. What happens in the film towards the end is something plausible that emerges from the main stand of the narrative. Here, he transgresses *Macbeth* in multiple ways. In real life, when a gangster is over exposed and the noose of the authorities tightens around him the only option he is left with is to flee the country if possible with his family. Bhardwaj chooses the same narrative whereby Maqbool attempts to escape with Nimmi and their newborn son. However, Nimmi dies in the process and Maqbool returns to the hospital to get his son. But when he comes across Guddu and Sameera taking care of his son as their own, he undergoes a major change of heart as if he accepts it as the best fate could have done for him. He no longer has the desire to remain hidden or to walk in shadows or to escape but on the other hand he comes out of the

hospital as if he is in a state of trance and when he is recognised and shot by Boti in front of the hospital there is no element of shock on his face. He sees an eagle flying in the sky and shuts his eyes and the film comes to an end with a song that speaks of the desire to be one with the beloved. Expression on his face, in his eyes and the flying eagle in the sky carry hints of his redemption that he could never have possibly thought of and this hope of redemption is not at all there in *Macbeth*.

In *Omkaara*, Bhardwaj chooses an entirely different geographical and cultural landscape. The narrative moves through the rugged interiors of Uttar Pradesh dominated by the nexus of *bahubalis*, politicians and the police. Both caste and religion play a significant role in the power structure all across India. It's not the same everywhere but has a distinct presence in every socio-cultural space. Mumbai's underworld as projected in *Maqbool* is partially secular in nature but has a strong presence of both caste and religion. The gangsters in Mumbai's underworld are tied more with their loyalties and business interests but they are not entirely free from their cast and religious inclinations. However, in *Omkaara*, the difference of caste plays a major role. Both in the events and the narrative of the film in this context, *Omkaara* can only be loosely compared with *Othello*. *Othello* being a Moore among the whites forms an equation of race, racial discrimination and acceptance. However, race can never be easily translated into caste. The caste structure in India is more complex than racial equations anywhere in the world. Therefore the predicament of the coloured people in terms of race can only be loosely related with the predicament of the Dalits in Indian caste system that with all the movements of social reforms, laws and sub-laws has survived in its own way not entirely inexplicable but it has survived. *Omkaara* is a half caste that is child of a Brahmin father and a Dalit woman that too a *Kanjri* whose profession is to provide cheap entertainment to all classes of people. *Omkaara's* position is doubly marginalized as he does not fit into either the upper caste or the Dalits and his mother's status is that of an out-caste community. Therefore, *Omakra's* social position is far more complex than the position of *Othello*. Unlike the straight forward racial division in

Othello, the social structure in *Omkara* carries all the complexities of the caste system prevalent in India.

The organic nature of the narrative in the film or in *Maqbool* and *Haider* is the outcome of the filmmaker's stance, insights to the geopolitical and socio-cultural landscape and more importantly a deep association with the language and characters that emerge from such spaces. Normal Hindi cinema very often plays havoc with the local dialect that the speaker of that dialect may even often feel offended. However, Vishal Bhardwaj keeps both the language and its accent as close as possible to the chosen cultural space. In one of his interviews, speaking in the context of *Omkara* he pointed out that he recorded the dialogues of each of the main characters in his own voice because he belongs to the same cultural space. It takes a lot of effort on both the part of the director and the actors to catch and convert a local dialect and its accent in their own language but Vishal Bhardwaj makes it a point in his films that they do so. Diane Busutil in the article, "Film Narrative: A study of three important film theorists and filmmakers" remarks,

Narrative films specialize in transforming enactments of stories into realism, which is one reason why they are so popular and easily digestible as a film language. Traditionally, narrative films use dialogue as a main communicative device to tell a story, whereas experimental and film dance works require an articulated use of film aesthetics to convey a particular theme or mood within their visual constructs, thereby negating the main purpose of narrative driven films, i.e.: to tell a story. Although the outcomes of these two film genres may be vastly different, their cinematic tools are the same: montage, camera movements, scale of the shots, relationships between the image and speech, sequences, and other large syntagmatic units (Metz, 1991:93). The assemblage of the aforementioned units is what creates the aesthetic style from which the film language is constructed. (Busutil 2)

Vishal Bhardwaj combines the elements of both narrative and experimental approach in his films. His reliance on narrative film technique largely depends upon the dialogues in which he is very specific about

the dialects and accents prevalent in the chosen socio-cultural space. They provide a rhythm to the narrative that keeps the story rooted in the specific space. Along with language come the mannerisms that are unique to different cultural spaces.

There is a visible presence of tacit sexual innuendos in different cultural contexts often used obliquely to create humour. However, there is some difference in the way men and women use them. In some regions, there are songs full of abuses targeting each other on occasions like marriages but they are taken in a lighter way. Vishal Bhardwaj captures these frames of communications in his films. For instance, in *Omkara*, *Omkara* and his friends show a video clip of their opponent leader to *Captaan* Singh where the leader is having sex with some woman at which he calls him, Hmm... ghaghre me ghus ke Kar rahe the fund raising...! Hai...! Ab zindagi bhar TV me baithke dekhna lok sabha... (hmm... was it a fund raising one or a skirt raising one...! Now watch the parliament on your TV set for the rest of your miserable life.). (Bhardwaj and at el, 33) The above dialogue may appear to be of little significance but they are very crucial in establishing both narrative and the cultural context of the film.

A close examination of *Haider*'s narrative structure reveals a great degree of evolution in Vishal Bhardwaj's cinematic narratology. The film as a whole can be seen as a tragedy, a tribute to Kashmir and humanity in general and at the same time a tragic love poem for Kashmir and kashmiriyat. The geographical, socio-political and the cultural contexts of Kashmir are entirely different from those of Mumbai in *Maqbool* and Uttar Pradesh in *Omkara*. Kashmir, known for its perennial beauty and very often the backdrop of romantic films of the 1970s and 1980s is no longer the heaven on the earth as it used to be. This heaven is under a constant state of siege whether it be the military, the fundamentalists, the separatists, or the militants, for some freedom fighters.

How so ever scattered may be Kashmir or the lives of Kashmiris, the plot and narrative of *Haider* has been tightly knit. There are apparently no fringes or loose ends in the narrative. Right from the beginning of the film, the tension and the perennial state of crisis become evident and one scene shifts into another keeping together the pace and tone of the film. As the

film moves further, Bhardwaj builds upon the elements he introduces in the first twenty minutes of the film. Both *Haider* and Kashmir remain at the centre of the narrative but there is parallel narrative threads all joined together by a sense of a collective tragedy. Even Ghazala and Arshia reflect the tragedy of Kashmir in their personal lives of sufferings and betrayals. While Arshia becomes submissive and lost and withdraws into herself, Ghazala ties explosives on her body in an attempt to save Haider. Unlike in Hamlet, Khurram does not die in the end but on the other hand is seriously mimed requesting Haider to kill him. Haider tries but can't bring himself to the task. It might be a pity for his understanding of Ghazala's words *Inteqam se sirf inteqam paida Hota hai. Jab tak hum apne intekam se azad nahi hoge, tab tak koi azadi hame azad nahi kar sakti...* (Revenge does not set us free... freedom lies beyond revenge... True freedom). (Bhardwaj and Peer 210) In the end, Haider leaving the shooting sight and Khurram behind keeps the multiple tragedies of Kashmir open and unfinished. Bhardwaj very subtly intertwines all the narrative threads and gives life to the tragedy of Kashmir, its people and Haider.

Music plays a very important role in Bollywood movies. It includes both the background music and the music in songs. In Bhardwaj's films songs are part of the narrative as they do not break the continuity of the narrative. Interestingly enough, the background music in his films is also a subtle part of the narrative. Being a music director himself, Bhardwaj uses it as an advantage in his films. The background music seeps in and grows gradually. He is also very particular in using the musical instruments that are really used in the socio-cultural space he chooses for his films. His music blends with the nuances of the moods, action and overall tone of the film. In one of his interviews with Devansh Sharma in *Firstpost*, on July 04, 2020,

Devansh Sharma: All your compositions, whether from *Omkaara* (set in Meerut), *Haider* (Kashmir), *Patakh* (Rajasthan), and *Sonchiriya* (Chambal), are very true to their land. How do you incorporate local elements from places you have not grown up in or around?

Vishal Bhardwaj: Filmmaking allows you to live so many lives across cultures. I had never

been to Kashmir before *Haider*. I went there with my co-writer and listened to Kashmiri folk music. India is so rich culturally as there's a new dialect every few hundred kilometres. I wanted these local elements to enrich my film and music as well. (Bhardwaj)

In *Haider*, Vishal Bhardwaj uses traditional Kashmiri musical instruments including the *Tumbaknaer*, *Sarangi*, *Rabab* and *Nout*. In the song *Bismil*, which is a performance within a performance, Bhardwaj uses traditional instruments and puppetry in the show that brings the crisis to its peak. Devasheesh Pandey in his article, —Vishal Bhardwaj's Musical World Is A Back Door to Your Own Heartl remarks on the music of *Maqbool*, Set in the world of smuggling and crime, the music of *Maqbool* builds theatricality into scenes and adds a sense of socio- historical meaning as well as fulfilling the functions of a classical score. Jehangir 'Abba ji' Khan's (Pankaj Kapoor) patriarchal ways are supplemented with *qawwali* sounds, which serves as mood music for his portions. Bhardwaj tames it to a motif, with mournful violins playing out in the background to emphasise on his terror. (Pandey) Folk music gives the scenes with *Abba ji* in them the justification they need by creating a sense of menacing air around him. However, the first time audiences come to know about the love and ambition of its lead characters (Tabu and Irrfan), a *qawwali* song, *Tu mere rubaru*, not only marks their transgression against *Abba ji*, but also reinforces the belief that the couple will oppose him in his own game and that the music acts as the characters' inner voices, speaking when they are silent. Bhardwaj uses the background music also to set the pace of his scenes, his music has the distinct quality of creating the nuances of a specific scene and of mixing it up with the tone of anticipation of what might unfold. It becomes intense and subtle with the intensity of the scenes and he frequently experiments with the pace of his music with specific moments of silence and sounds of objects that create a meaning of their own.

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