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Bollywood Adaptations of Shakespeare

An Analysis of Vishal Bhardwaj's Trilogy

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Introduction

Indian Empire or no Indian Empire; we cannot do without Shakespeare!

Indian Empire will go, at any rate, some day; but this Shakespeare does not go,
he lasts forever with us.

T. Carlyle, Lecture on “The Hero as Poet. Dante; Shakespeare”, 1840

We certainly cannot give up our Shakespeare.

S. Viswanathan, Lecture on “Shakespeare’s Plays and an Indian Sensibility”, 1986

In these two quotations, an analogous sentiment towards Shakespeare (1564-1616) is endorsed by a Scottish philosopher and an Indian professor: in 1840, during a lecture on “The Hero as Poet,” Thomas Carlyle expressed the opinion that, unlike the Empire, which he was willing to give up, Shakespeare would always remain with the British; in 1986, almost a century and a half later, an Indian professor placed the same possessive adjective, “our,” before Shakespeare’s name. In their speeches, only the references are different. In effect, while offering some speculations about what he called “a possible community of sensibility between the Indian [...] and Shakespearean drama,” Viswanathan underpinned the cardinal importance that the playwright of Stratford has acquired in the subcontinent, “fortunately” surviving the end of the political empire and enduring “happily” the passing of time (Viswanathan, 1986: 269-270).

In India, which the British left in 1947 bringing the British Raj to an end after ninety years of government and three centuries of commercial domination and colonial monopoly, Shakespeare’s influence is considerable still today. Although independence was achieved, Indians did not fully reject the substantial body of literature that the British had brought into the subcontinent: Shakespeare’s theatrical works, used first to entertain British colonisers and European traders, then to civilise native Indians, are part of today’s Indian education and, though having disappeared almost completely from stages approximately between the 1910s and the 1940s, they continue to affect Indian arts and culture. Poonam Trivedi distinguishes various phases, each characterised by different approaches to the playwright: when his plays were incorporated into the civilising mission of the British Empire, Indians seemed to be awed by them, thus taking them probably “too respectfully;” in the late 19th and 20th centuries, instead, Parsi theatre productions tended to treat Shakespeare “in a cavalier fashion, mixing and mashing up his plays into hybrid and melodramatic versions,” so much so that their

representations were a source of embarrassment for academics, who considered them “populist travesties.” This period was followed by other three moments: firstly a phase of faithful translations and performances, secondly a phase of creative adaptations and assimilations into local theatrical forms, ultimately the current moment of “irreverence,” in which theatre and film directors are feeling free to “play around” with Shakespearean works (Trivedi, 2016). Globalisation and the growing accessibility to the Internet are possibly enhancing Indian youth’s confidence in the postcolonial, so that, among the various initiatives, an annual festival called “Hamara Shakespeare” (meaning “Our Shakespeare”) is held in Chennai and an annual short play competition is organised by the Shakespeare Society of India in Delhi. In August 2015, even the students of an Indian Engineering and Technological University organised an original “Great Indian Shakespeare Festival” in which, for instance, *Julius Caesar* was set in the corporate world and entailed the deposition of the title character as CEO (Trivedi, 2016). *Julius Caesar*, together with other Shakespearean plays that deal with the theme of guilt (i.e. *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth*), has also been used in translation as a form of rehabilitation therapy in Indian prisons (Trivedi, 2012). In the Indian context, screen adaptations too (become successful at a transnational level) and unconventional stage productions testify to today’s different types of engagement with the playwright, who, “detached from the colonial baggage, [...] continues to speak in strange and wondrous forms to newer generations” (Trivedi, 2016).

Especially in recent years, Shakespeare has thus been rewritten and reinvented in a multitude of ways and in multiple media; outside Great Britain and India, he has been read, translated, and interpreted in both English-speaking and non-English speaking countries. Scholarly debates have arisen over the playwright’s presence in almost every age and culture, leading some academics to link his works with a presumed universality, this being an idea already present in Ben Jonson’s famous assertion in the Preface to the *First Folio* (1623) that Shakespeare “was not for an age but for all time.” Despite recognising that Shakespearean plays have crossed the borders of both their cradle (Great Britain) and the theatre medium (*Such Tweet Sorrow*, for instance, is a unique Twitter adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* “performed” by professional actors in a five-week time span in 2010), my dissertation departs from the use of the ambiguous and misleading concept of “universality” to embrace the idea of the adaptability and easy transculturation of the playwright’s theatrical works. This stance is clearly summarised

by Jeffrey R. Wilson on the page in Harvard University website dedicated to his projects:

Shakespeare is not universal, but Shakespeare is versatile. That is, Shakespeare is not good and true for all people in all places in all times, but his drama does have a tendency, much more than other writers from his age or others, to speak to diverse cultures in different times.¹

Adhering to this view, my study also moves away from some other critics' assumptions that the playwright is still studied and performed only as a consequence of colonialism, having merely served "as a powerful tool of empire, transported to foreign climes along with the doctrine of European cultural superiority" (O'Toole, 2012), in order to impart the "humanistic" ideals of British civilisation. By contrast, in the subcontinent, the playwright's position has been twofold, both colonial and postcolonial, both functional and cultural.

Maurice Hindle, in his introduction to *Studying Shakespeare on Film* (2007), highlights that Shakespeare "has [also] always had an audience," whether small or large, elite or popular. Whilst up to the beginning of the 20th century Shakespearean audiences were mainly limited to theatrical spaces, the invention of cinema and, in particular, the success Laurence Olivier had with his wartime *Henry V* (1944) paved the way for an increase in the number of potential Shakespearean spectators (2007: xiv): at the time, Shakespeare's plays produced for the stage were joined by those produced for the screen; theatre audiences were joined by moviegoers and, since "all the world's a stage" (*As You Like It*, 2.7.138), India has demonstrated to be no exception.

The inception of Indian cinematic tradition can be dated back to the early 20th century, during the so-called "Indian Renaissance," when Dadasaheb Phalke, the commonly-known "father of Indian cinema," started out on his career: his *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), a commercially successful silent movie, is said to have marked the beginning of Indian cinema. At the time, Western culture had already been absorbed massively into the mainstream Indian one, so much so that even Shakespeare, despite having been used by colonisers to promote English language and Western core values to the detriment of the endemic ones, was translated and adapted in various Indian languages. Although historical and mythological films or episodes, together with Hollywood action movies, were privileged throughout the whole 20th century, Indian

¹ See: <<https://wilson.fas.harvard.edu/aphorisms/shakespeare>>

cinema has engaged Shakespeare's works, their motifs, and their main themes, since its foundation. Thus, being part and parcel of Indian culture, the playwright has inspired Indian cinema more or less consciously, in particular Bollywood, and his plays have had a significant impact on various screen genres, encompassing silent films, theatrical cinematisation, and feature films. Notwithstanding, it is after the advent of director Vishal Bhardwaj that the so-called "Bollywood Shakespeare" has become a serious field of studies and academic research (Dionne and Kapadia, 2014: 22). In his Shakespearean trilogy, which my dissertation analyses, this contemporary filmmaker adapted three of Shakespeare's most memorable tragedies, namely *Macbeth*, adapted as *Maqbool* (2003), *Othello*, adapted as *Omkaara* (2006), and *Hamlet*, adapted as *Haider* (2014), with the aim of creating original works that deal with the violence and vicissitudes of modern-day Indian society and politics. In effect, as the director declared in a conversation with Anuradha SenGupta, in their productions filmmakers tend to react to various situations around them: these are mostly political, socio-political, and have to do with inequalities (2017).

The main purpose of my thesis is precisely to examine Bhardwaj's trilogy by comparing and contrasting it with its Shakespearean sources, especially in terms of contents. My study devotes a careful attention to the Bollywood tropes, the historical and the social references contained in the three Hindi adaptations, together with all those elements that make the trilogy engrossing and enthralling even for a non-Hindi-speaking moviegoer who has to watch it subtitled. I thus divide my work into five chapters, two brief introductory ones and three main sections, each dedicated to a film.

The first chapter focuses on Shakespeare's influence in colonial and postcolonial India, a territory over which Britain's East India Company was granted the commercial monopoly in 1600 and which ultimately became the pivot of one of the most enduring colonial empires in the world. Shakespeare's plays, and English literature in general, were exported into the subcontinent with the aim of imparting standards of proper moral behaviour to the natives and, whilst at the beginning there took place some debate about whether to provide colonial education in English or via native languages, English education in English was finally introduced. Thus, native officials could be used in a cheaper administration and serve as "interpreters" to mediate between locals and colonisers. This decision was followed by the establishment of colleges devoted to the teaching of Western humanities, the first being the Hindu College (1817) in Calcutta/Kolkata (Bengal). English-medium education became official in 1835, while

Shakespeare's plays entered curricula especially after the foundation of the first universities in 1857. As early as the mid-1750s, however, English language and literature had already spread thanks to the institution of colonial theatres like the Old and New Playhouse in Kolkata, where English troupes made up of famous Shakespearean actors regularly staged Shakespearean performances. Apart from Bengal, numerous companies were formed in other regions too and were managed mainly by Parsis, the most Westernised community in Bombay/Mumbai. In order to suit Indian tastes, Shakespeare's plays were often adapted and translated, especially as far as comedies and tragedies (which were made to end happily) are concerned; less interest, instead, was paid to history plays, as these deal with specific English historical contexts. A real "craze for Shakespearean drama" (Singh, 1989: 455) characterised the years between 1850 and 1913, then the already-mentioned period known as "dark stage" began (1910s-1940s). Despite some disagreement on its inception and end, the playwright allegedly reappeared after India's declaration of independence. Since its earliest days, also Indian cinema has been interested in the playwright's works, both adapting them directly and using their motifs. The subchapter concerning the influence of Shakespeare on Indian cinema follows Verma's (2012) subdivision into three phases: the appropriative phase (1913 - mid-1950s), the assimilative phase (1950s-1990s), and the contemporary phase, of which Vishal Bhardwaj's trilogy is part and parcel.

The second chapter outlines the origins and history of the Indian film industry, preceded in the 19th century by photography, first employed by amateurs and aspiring professionals. The site of the first screenings of motion pictures was Mumbai, which had also been the cradle of Parsi theatre groups, who funded the nascent film industry and provided it with both performers and writers. The aforementioned Dadasaheb Phalke opened the way to the so-called "silent era," whose productions were shot mainly in Kolkata and Mumbai, while other minor locations paved the way for the inception of regional cinemas. In 1931, sound was introduced with the release of Ardeshir Irani's *Alam Ara*, whose success prompted filmmakers to insert songs and dances in their movies. With the beginning of the "sound era," the two issues directors had to tackle were the choice of language (they finally opted for Hindustani) and the need for actors and actresses who were able to both dance and sing in the chosen language. A solution to this second problem was found in 1935 with the introduction of playback singing, a technique which is still predominant in today's Hindi cinema, including Bhardwaj's trilogy. The sound era was followed by the "studio era," in which

filmmaking was organised like at Hollywood, where the entire cost of a film production was borne by studios that had technicians and actors as full-time employees. Soon afterwards, both World War II and Partition had considerable impact on Indian cinema: studios went in slow decline, whereas independent producers rose. Insurgencies and disorders between religious groups followed the division of the Raj into the modern states of India and Pakistan, thus provoking, for example, the further separation of Punjab and Bengal and the consequent loss of personnel and audience in their respective film industries. Ganti (2004), my main source for this chapter, divides post-independence Indian cinema into three major eras: the first, or “Golden Age” (1950s); the second, or the “decade of the angry man” (1970s), whose name derives from Bollywood star Amitabh Bachchan’s acting role in the extremely successful *Zanjeer* (1973); the third, which began in the 1990s and was marked by economic liberalisation and the introduction of satellite television, first despised, then soon regarded as an effective means to promote the film market. Liberalisation has favoured globalisation, so much so that certain Hindi movies now enjoy a greater commercial success in the UK and USA than in India. Most of contemporary Bollywood films are classified as *Masalas* (literally “a mixture of spices,” so “a mixture of genres”), are aimed at large audiences, and are characterised by the inclusion of songs and dances. Bollywood, another highly debated term which throughout my dissertation I have referred to mainly in the neutral sense of “Mumbai-based film industry,” produces about 30 percent of the total production of Indian cinema and is oriented towards box-office success and broad audience appeal.

In the two introductory chapters, basic notions of theory of adaptation are provided as well. The following three major chapters, instead, discuss Vishal Bhardwaj’s Shakespearean adaptations by investigating them in chronological order. Each chapter is further divided into three sections, that is, the context, the characters, and the analysis of one meaningful scene.

Maqbool (2003) relocates Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in the mafia underworld of Mumbai. In this film, as in the following two, the director retains the Shakespearean main plot and characters, but gives them different Indian names (usually preserving the initial sound letter), and sometimes connects them with different family ties. In *Maqbool*, for example, it is fundamental to note that Nimmi/Lady Macbeth is not Maqbool’s/Macbeth’s wife but his lover: she enjoys a secret relationship with the eponymous character while being the official mistress of Jahangir Khan (Abbaji), the

ganglord who has brought up Maqbool since childhood and for whom the gangster now works. In addition to this, Lady Macbeth's counterpart gets pregnant and gives birth to a baby boy, thus departing considerably from the original play. In the section of the chapter regarding characters, I devote my attention to the power relationship between Nimmi and Maqbool, underlining that Nimmi's incitement on her lover is more effective than Maqbool's own ambition to take Abbaji's/Duncan's place at the head of the gang. The other characters I dedicate an entire section to are Pandit and Purohit, the Indian counterparts of the three Weird Sisters. Also in this case, Bhardwaj moves away from the Shakespearean source and transforms the three Witches into two clairvoyant police officers that are in connivance with the mafia system of the city: by decreeing the rise and fall of the characters under the pretext of maintaining a balance of power, they are the real choreographers of the tragedy. A comparison between their prophecies, which are all made using the Indian astrologers' horoscope grid, and the Witches' ones is made: for instance, the coming of Great Birnam Wood to Dunsinane in *Macbeth* parallels the coming of the sea to Maqbool's house in *Maqbool*. Supernatural elements, like Banquo's ghost, are instead substituted by visions, hallucinations, and flashbacks, as spectres are not recurring elements in Bollywood productions. The principal characters come from one of the exiled Muslim communities of mainly-Hindu Mumbai, a cosmopolitan and multicultural city where violence dominates: Muslims and Hindus (the latter being the two inspectors and Banquo's and Malcom's counterparts) are nonetheless shown as cooperating with each other in the underworld. In the last section of this third chapter, I finally compare Maqbool's death with Macbeth's defeat; moreover, I examine the main character's death in other two movies: Luc Besson's *Léon: The Professional* (1994) and Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957). In effect, critics seem to agree that these two movies served as sources to the director. In particular, Bhardwaj was inspired by Léon's death in the homonymous film: both Maqbool and Léon die while the camera is "set in their eyes," thus filming their viewpoint and their final fall onto the ground; whilst in Bhardwaj the screen reddens, in Besson light intensifies until the screen becomes almost completely white. In Kurosawa's very last scene, instead, the major similarity is given by the camera lingering on the tyrant's grimace: in all the three films, the death of the title character is shown through a focus on his facial expression.

Bhardwaj's screen version of *Othello* (2006) sets the tragedy in a small fictional town of Western Uttar Pradesh, where violence affects both private and public life. As

in all the three adaptations, music interludes are integral to the storyline and do not entail any change either in location or costume. Bianca's counterpart, who is not a prostitute like in *Othello* but a local dancer, is the lead performer in two of these shows, which, only in this case, are diegetic and meticulously choreographed. Other Bollywood conventions, concerning marriage rituals and wedding ceremonies, are observed. The two chief agents are Langda and Indu, Iago's and Emilia's counterparts: I describe them by referring to their relationship with their family (they are husband and wife, they have an eight-year-old child and, most importantly, Indu is made to be Omkara's sister) and by also making parallels with Hindu mythology (Langda is comparable to Shiva; Indu is comparable to Parvati/Durga/Kali). Omkara and Kesu (Cassio), instead, appear as outsiders, since the former is referred to as the "Dark Lord," while the latter as the "Firangi," a word that means "foreigner, Westernised." In the film, Omkara has the darkest complexion of all, but "race" seems not to be as influential in the development of the storyline as it is in *Othello*; contrary to what may be thought, "caste," whose system is still peculiar in today's Uttar Pradesh, does not simplistically substitute it. Rather, both categories are somehow investigated, even if distrust, betrayal, and revenge remain the main focus of the film. Among outsiders, I include Kesu too, as his Westernised status is often ridiculed and his modernity is perceived as a threat by the eponymous character, to the point that it becomes the cause of the gangster's suspect of Dolly's/Desdemona's infidelity. In the section dedicated to the analysis of one meaningful scene, I investigate the film's ending, the dramatic climax that leads to the title character's suicide. I find it noteworthy for Indu's role of avenger, because, unlike in *Othello*, "Emilia" survives and kills "Iago," thus avenging her beloved sister-in-law and defending her family's honour, threatened by both her brother, who has killed his wife, and by her husband, the villain that has caused all the events that have brought to such a gory conclusion. Indu's role is allegedly similar to Radha's in Mehboob Khan's epic *Mother India* (1957), whose structure (present time – flashback – present time), in turn, resembles that of Orson Welles's black-and-white *Othello* (1952).

Haider (2014) ends Bhardwaj's trilogy by setting *Hamlet* in 1995 in Kashmir, the notorious land of contention between India and Pakistan. This location has been so much debated that not only did not the film pass the censor board in Pakistan, but, after its release in October 2014, it made Twitter users alternate #BoycottHaider and #HaiderTrueCinema tweets in their profiles. I thus dedicate an entire section to the analysis of the social context by comparing some of the film's scenes with the

corresponding episodes in its major source: screenwriter Basharat Peer's memoir *Curfewed Night* (2008). The proper Shakespearean plot is developed in the second part of the movie, in particular after the coming on scene of Roohdaar, a Pakistani agent allegedly standing for the Shakespearean Ghost. I devote an entire subchapter to his various appearances, starting from his encounter with Arshia/Ophelia: in effect, Haider's/Hamlet's father, a doctor, has been arrested and made to disappear for having performed an appendectomy on a militant leader; Roohdaar introduces himself as "the doctor's soul." The other main character I examine is Ghazala/Gertrude, a strong woman that changes completely the ending of Shakespeare's tragedy. No fight between Laertes's and Hamlet's counterparts is arranged; by contrast, the mother makes herself explode as a suicide bomber in order to save her son and put an end to her sad existence. The comparative section of this chapter deals with the "To be or not to be" scene and "The Mousetrap" in Shakespeare, Bhardwaj, and Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet 2000* (2000), which I have chosen for the analogous young age of the main character, for the relationship between the main character and cinema devices (both Almereyda's and Bhardwaj's Hamlets put on their own personal play-within-the-play), and for its chronological collocation at the beginning of the new millennium (Almereyda's is the first adaptation of *Hamlet* of the years 2000s, Bhardwaj's the last one at an international level).

The sources I use to write my dissertation range from written to audio-visual materials, and include academic essays, newspaper articles, PhD theses, and online interviews.

Chapter 1

Shakespeare in Colonial and Postcolonial India

Starting with the assumption that “all the world’s a stage” (*As You Like It*, 2.7.138), or better Shakespeare’s stage, at the turn of the 21st century the playwright of Stratford was named “Writer of the Millennium,” an appellation that recognised how the Shakespearean canon has spread widely to different cultures, in different times, and under different circumstances (Trivedi, 2005: 13). In particular, outside Great Britain, Shakespeare allegedly shares his longest history of engagement with India, the former British colony where Shakespearean plays have been performed in theatres for approximately two hundred years and in cinemas for about a century (Thakur, 2014: 21).

The playwright’s unique relation with India began early in his career, when in 1588 Richard Hakluyt published the first eyewitness account of the subcontinent by Ralph Fitch, an Englishman who had embarked on the *Tyger* on the way to Aleppo and the Indian Ocean: this could be the voyage Shakespeare alluded to in *Macbeth* (1.3.7). In the following years, the connection between the playwright and India was furthered by mercantile trade; in effect, there seems to be evidence that Shakespeare’s plays were performed on ships sailing east to the so-called “Spice Islands.” For example, both *Hamlet* and *Richard II* were supposedly commissioned by the East India Company and staged aboard the *Red Dragon* respectively on 5 and 29 September 1607, while the ship was anchored off the coast of today’s Sierra Leone² (Trivedi, 2005: 13).

The East India Company had been formed some years before: on 22 September 1599, under the presiding of the Lord Mayor of London, 101 merchants gathered in Founder’s Hall to explore the establishment of what was to become the Company; on this occasion, £30,133 were collected in the form of subscriptions supporting that new concept of trade. The following year, Thomas Smythe was elected as the Company’s Governor and, by the time, subscriptions had doubled. 31st December 1600 marked the moment when Queen Elizabeth I officially granted traders a charter that allocated the East India Company the commercial monopoly in the East for a fifteen-year period, a time span during which the Company focused on trading spices (such as peppers, cloves

² The truthfulness of these episodes is debated. According to Huang, the anecdote of Captain William Keeling’s staging of *Hamlet* on board the *Dragon* is a 19th-century forgery due to a strong desire of globalising Shakespeare (2016: 5). Cf. Taylor’s reconstruction of the performance (2001: 211-248).

and nutmeg) and went into competition with the Dutch East Indies Company (Riddick, 2006: 1-2).

Before the foundation of the East India Company, the Far East had already attracted Britain's interest, so much so that a certain Father Thomas Stevens, after having set sail in Lisbon, became the first Englishman to arrive in India (1579), thus growing English merchants' willingness to create a trade route with those territories. Moreover, for centuries India had been described as a country "rich in romance, a land of enchantment and wonder, a synonym for wealth and splendour" (from a quotation in Kapadia, 1997: 7). An analogous idea of place of magical power and prosperity was further underpinned by some Elizabethan writers, most famously by Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*³ and by Christopher Marlowe in *Doctor Faustus* and *Tamburlaine the Great*⁴. Though at the time Britain's interest seemed to be limited to commerce, the East India Company, which started as a small trading firm, ultimately led to one of the world's most enduring colonial empires through the colonisation of millions of people. Shakespeare, or rather his plays, actively entered this colonialist process as part of the Empire's cultural and political investment (Kapadia, 1997: 6-7; Sultana, 2014: 52).

Initially adapted for the stage in order to introduce English education into the new colony, the playwright's theatrical works have enjoyed both a colonial and a postcolonial status: they cannot be judged as a mere colonial imposition, because today, in post-independence India, they are still relevant in cultural life and are admired by Indian audiences. The main reasons for their long-lasting, postcolonial presence seem to be their adaptability and their easy transculturation, that is, the possibility of translating them in diverse cultural contexts. In this regard, some critics, including several Indian scholars, claim that Shakespeare's plays have a universal validity and, therefore, a universal value (Dutta, 2013: 44; Sultana, 2014: 50-53). Others, like Huang, despite recognising that the playwright of Stratford is undoubtedly one of the most frequently adapted writers, specify that the supposed universality of his works has become a tautological myth. According to Huang, the contradiction lying in the assertion made by the first group of critics is that Shakespeare's canon is believed to have gone global because it is universal, but, at the same time, it is universal because it has gone global:

³ "The wealth of th' East, and pompe of Persian kings; / Gold, amber, yuorie, perles, owches, rings, / And all that else was pretious and deare" (3.4.23-25).

⁴ "Christopher Marlowe's Tamburlaine attempts to journey to India in search of power and riches. Marlowe's Faustus follows Tamburlaine's footsteps and bids the spirits to "fly to India for gold, / Ransack the ocean for orient pearl / And search all comers of the new found world / For pleasant fruits and princely delicats" (1.1.83-86)" (Kapadia, 1997: 7).

in other words, the concept of “global Shakespeare” itself is seen as evidence of his universality (2016: 2). In turn, the playwright and his works’ mythical status have created other cultural myths, many of which have also been shaped by specific localities like the London Globe and Stratford-upon-Avon, now become a site of pilgrimage for tourists more or less concerned with literature. The mythologizing of Shakespeare’s “virtual universal appeal” has then been fostered by the elevated number of intercultural appropriations of his plays, whose amount, however, seems to imply that they are the cause of the playwright’s presumed timelessness, not its consequence (Huang, 2016: 2-5).

In accordance with this view, Maguire and Smith present the timelessness of Shakespeare’s plays as one out of thirty Shakespearean myths, stories not stigmatised as being unsubstantiated inventions, but analysed in their having become accepted and ossified beliefs: in effect, “standing the test of time [, which Shakespeare actually did,] and being timeless are not the same thing” (2013: 144). Shakespeare’s theatrical works, neither being “firmly located in local references and details” as, for example, Middleton’s city comedies, nor having characters appearing as “types,” but rather being concerned with common men and their interiority, are not timeless; they instead deal with a timeless category, that is, the “human,” those human feelings and ways of behaviour with which we still identify (Maguire and Smith, 2013: 144; 148). Dennis Kennedy, in his *Foreign Shakespeare*, expresses the opinion that Shakespeare’s enduring value derives “from his malleability, from our own willingness to read in the pastness of the texts and find ourselves there” (1993: 301). Interviewed by Ankhi Mukherjee, Vishal Bhardwaj himself affirmed that, in the last 400 years, humanity has changed, but basic human emotions have remained the same, which would be the reason why “Shakespeare’s stories can be placed anytime. Beyond borders” (Mukherjee, 2014: 211).

In contrast with the “human,” other categories, such as politics and the social position of women, have continuously varied according to time and place. A clarifying example could be provided by *The Merchant of Venice*, a play which, after the Holocaust, has acquired a different relevance, and now cannot be read or seen from the same perspective of its original audience, nor of audiences preceding that infamous genocide during World War II. Hence, the concept of “universality” is too ambiguous to be used comprehensively to refer to Shakespeare: it could rather be the timelessness of

the “human” that has made the playwright the most translated, adapted, performed and published Western author in the subcontinent (Sen, 2010: 213; Sultana, 2014: 53).

Still on this topic, in the 1980s professor Datta, though conveying a radical idea of “transcendence,” observed that Shakespeare is still “read” because he deals with “human beings, [with] their sentiments and feelings [that] do not change in any real sense,” and, as his plays raise issues and depict clashes of values that are relevant across time, his appeal seems bound to endure (cited in Singh, 1989: 456). Particularly in India, where the Shakespearean works that have been adapted the most are tragedies and comedies (a minor interest has been aroused by history plays because they outline well-defined English backgrounds), Shakespeare appears almost everywhere, “in the very language of political debate and public utterance, of Bombay cinema, of signs on the road, in names of prize-winning varieties of mangoes, in reflections upon the past, or in pronouncements about current affairs.” His plays are so various, so versatile, and open to interpretation, that they have also provided the language to express anti-imperialist sentiments (Loomba, 2005: 121). Professor Bate stresses that, also outside India, Shakespeare’s theatrical works have been used “to extraordinary political effect”: just as an example, during the Soviet era, Shakespearean tragedies were produced in eastern Europe to criticise the regime and circumvent censorship; in Africa, *Julius Caesar* offered a paradigm of rebellion against the imperial rule on different occasions, being also quoted by the Youth League of the African National Congress in its manifesto of 1944 (2012).

In the colonial period, the British used Shakespeare in their programme of colonial domination, which, inexorably, extended to cultural domination. Not only was the playwright inserted into the curricula as an exemplary literary figure and as a symbol of artistic greatness, but his corpus was also taught to Indians because it allegedly contained the core values of Western civilisation. Whilst missionaries hoped to instil knowledge of Christianity through the Bible, government administrators aimed at the formation of an educated class of natives able to deal with the business of the British government in India by means of literature. The relationship between Britain and the Indian subcontinent appeared as a “master/servant” or “parent/child” one, where the masters (the British colonisers) guided their servants (the colonised Indians) towards a specific direction and a certain degree of cultural contact. Beyond Shakespeare, other major Western texts were integrated into the colonial educational curricula to impart standards of behaviour and morality (Kapadia, 1997: 15; 25; Dutta, 2013: 35).

Having ascertained that the British “exploited” their literature by making it a part of the Empire’s political and economic investment, it is now necessary to distinguish between Shakespeare as taught to Indians through official colonial educational channels (chapter 1.1), and the history of Shakespearean theatrical and cinematic adaptations in the subcontinent, including their translation in almost every Indian language (chapters 1.2 and 1.3). These aspects are nonetheless connected; for example, the insertion of Shakespeare’s plays into the curriculum of the Hindu College awakened such a keen interest for drama that students started to appreciate it and translate the playwright’s works themselves. Since that time, Shakespeare has been a fertile source for Indian theatrical plays, Indian films and popular songs, and has also had a prominent position in Indian education. Furthermore, over the last century and a half, at least two hundred versions of his works have been translated and/or adapted in Indian vernacular languages (Bhatia, 1998: 96; Sultana, 2014: 52). Along with plays, Shakespeare’s plots have tended to supply non-dramatic texts: in a great number of subcontinental languages, for instance, we find more-or-less detailed renderings of the Lambs’ *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), sometimes directed at an adult readership instead of the original young audience. Some Indian Shakespearean prose was chiefly meant for reading, like Shakespearean tales in Sanskrit, the earliest of which being *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by R. Krishnamacharya in 1892; other versions were explicitly intended for performance, like the Tamil prose adaptations by P. Sambanda Mudaliar. This kind of prose testifies to the import of another Western product: the novel (Chaudhuri, 2016: 4).

In short, then, while “the England of trade, commerce, imperialism and the penal code has not endured” after India’s independence, Shakespeare’s “imperishable Empire” has remained and seems not destined to leave the Indian subcontinent (from a quotation in Loomba, 2005: 121). Hence, my dissertation shows that, more than a cultural icon, the playwright has been present and influential as a “resource to be exploited for characters and situations,” which is evident especially in contemporary mainstream cinema of Mumbai (Verma, 2005: 270).

1.1 Shakespeare in Indian education

In the Indian subcontinent, British education was introduced for two purposes: a functional and a cultural one. On the one hand, colonisers wanted to run administration less expensively by using native officials; on the other, they aspired to create an elite

that was “Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect,” so as to have natives act as direct “interpreters” and be able to bridge the gap between the colonialists and the rest of the Indian population (quote from Macaulay’s *Minute on Education* of 1835⁵, cited in Singh, 1989: 449-450). Thus, Shakespeare’s plays, which were usually defined by attributes of “morality” and “wisdom” (Bhatia, 1998: 99), started to be taught in schools and colleges in order to spread Western moral values among the “uncivilised” and “morally depraved” Indians (Thakur, 2012: 4). In this way, the project of the Empire was idealised, whilst its exploitative effects were hidden (Singh, 1989: 450).

The importance of the colonisers’ responsibility towards the education of the natives increased progressively as the British reinforced their presence in the subcontinent. According to Gauri Viswanathan, British rulers were well aware that they could govern only by co-opting a new elite class of people that embodied Western thoughts and ideas (cited in Singh, 1989: 449). Therefore, at the beginning there was some debate as to whether colonial education should be provided in Indian languages or through English language and literature; then, this second direction was taken. Hence, by allocating English literature a civilising mission, colonisers manipulated and controlled Indians intellectually rather than militarily, thus also securing their consent (Bhatia, 1998: 99). English-medium mandatory instruction was increasingly funded and colleges devoted to Western humanities were established; Protestant morality too started to be taught mainly via the secular medium of literature. The British educational project finally succeeded in making the natives in the image of Western men; these new “civilised” and urbanised English-speaking Indians, however, soon began to demand greater opportunities in terms of jobs, wages, and status. They also used their newly-imparted Western knowledge to unveil the hypocrisy of the colonial rule and to form and exercise their own leadership (Kapadia, 1997: 16-17; Banerji, 2012: 30).

Along with renewing East India Company’s administration in India for twenty years and opening trade to all licensed British merchants, the British Parliament’s Charter Act of 1813 allotted a lakh of rupees a year (Rs 100,000/year) for the education of the natives, encompassing the revival and improvement of literature and the promotion of some knowledge of science. Moreover, an episcopate was established, and Christian missionaries were admitted to India and allowed to preach: thanks to the

⁵ Full text available at
<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealc/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.htm
|> (last viewed 8 November 2017).

London Missionary Society, the Church Missionary Society, and the Baptist Missionary Society, a growth in elementary education immediately followed (Keith, 1936: 129; Riddick, 2006: 33; 158). On Indian initiative, on 20 January 1817 the Hindu College (later to be known as Presidency College) was founded in Calcutta⁶ by Ram Mohan Roy, David Hare, and Sir Edward Hyde East. It was the first Western-type collegiate institution in Asia: its curriculum included the study of English reading, English writing and English grammar, together with history, geography, mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, and other sciences (Riddick, 2006: 158; Chaudhuri, 2016: 3).

In the Hindu College, and in similar institutes, English-language education was imparted to upper-class children: the Shakespearean canon was thus taught only to those pupils who could pay for a very expensive instruction. In 1835, the notorious Education Act based on Macaulay's *Minute on Education* came into force: still privileging English, it led to the full inclusion of English language and Western literature into Indian academic curricula to the detriment of "Oriental" education (Sanskrit and local literatures). After 1837, even British administration decided to prioritise English at court, so courses exclusively in English were offered to those Indians who wanted to become professionals or apply for government jobs (Sen, 2010: 196-197). English language and literature became specific subjects of examination in 1855, when a commissioned report established the requirements needed by those who aspired to join the East India Company's civil services. In examinations, these disciplines could earn each candidate a thousand points, so much so that knowing them became almost a necessity (Bhatia, 1998: 99-100). English literature, and Shakespeare's plays, entered Indian educational curricula especially after the establishment of the first universities in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras in 1857⁷. In the schools and colleges of these principal urban centres, which had access to English education earlier than other areas, Shakespeare's plays were soon staged even by pupils (Sen, 2010: 180). A particular emphasis was laid on the memorisation of the characters' speeches: students used to compete in contests, and prizes were awarded to those who could perfectly repeat lines word by word (Bhatia, 1998: 102).

⁶ Throughout the two introductory chapters, I refer to Kolkata using its old name, Calcutta, to Mumbai using its old name, Bombay, and to Chennai, using its old name, Madras. Calcutta became Kolkata in 2001, Bombay became Mumbai in 1995, while Madras became Chennai in 1996.

⁷ It is fundamental to acknowledge that Indian universities ran Honours and Master's courses in English literature well before British universities in Britain. A full account of these courses is to be found in Banerji's "'Every college student knows by heart': The Uses of Shakespeare in Colonial Bengal" (2012: 29-41).

The establishment of colleges, where instruction was provided by eminent British teachers like Henry Derozio and David L. Richardson (one of the founders of the Chowringhee Theatre), contributed to creating in students a taste for drama and a deep admiration for Shakespeare. Under the tutelage of these professors, students were made to stage his plays and to recite his lines; Richardson's pupils, in particular, were highly advised to attend Shakespeare productions too (Thakur, 2012: 4). Each year, at least one of Shakespeare's plays was staged by college students in their respective institutes; a special commitment to acting was shown by the already-mentioned Hindu College and by the Oriental Seminary of Calcutta. Their theatrical productions used European stage techniques, Western costumes, and all-male casts, adhering, in this sense, more to Renaissance practices than to the theatrical conventions of the Victorian age, when women appeared regularly on stage: in India, not only was women acting still a taboo, but colleges themselves were opened exclusively to young men. On a linguistic level, students tried to deliver Shakespeare's lines with as little Indian accent as possible (Kapadia, 1997: 13). The first on-record college performance was put on by Dhurumtollah Academy in Calcutta in December 1822, featuring the then thirteen-year-old Henry Derozio. This staging, like the majority of the first performances, was made of excerpts only. Other institutes where this theatrical tradition was more vivid were St. Xavier's College in Calcutta, M. S. University in Baroda, and St. Stephen's College in Delhi, a city which also witnessed the foundation of a Shakespeare Society in 1924 (Chaudhuri, 2016: 2).

In the earliest phase of British colonial education, many teachers and educators arrived from Britain in order to help teach English literature. Among them, the most renowned from the 19th and the early 20th centuries were: D. L. Richardson, C. H. Tawney, J. C. Scrimgeour and J. W. Holme in Calcutta; M. Hunter, F. W. Kellet, W. Miller and H. Stone in Madras; W. Raleigh in Aligarh and R. Scott in Bombay. Leading British authors, like Shakespeare, Jonson, Marvell, Defoe, Gray, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats and Arnold, were inserted into English literature syllabi. In this list, Milton did not initially figure because his *Paradise Lost* was alleged to be too overtly religious in both themes and images (Kapadia, 1997: 13; Chaudhuri, 2016: 3). School texts also usually contained entire sections concerning the advantages of British administration (like prosperity, technological and educational progresses), and even reporting significant quotes from the so-called "Magna Carta of India" (Kapadia, 1997: 11). The Magna Carta was the Government of India Act of 1858 through which the

functions of the British East India Company were transferred to the British Crown, including the control of the Hindu College and of analogous educational institutes in Bombay and Madras. As mentioned above, universities opened in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in those years, then, between 1864 and 1868, approximately 5,000 students enrolled in the constituent colleges. Furthermore, in 1861 the High Court was established, which paved the way for aspiring pleaders: law became the most popular course for students. Following the revival of the Indian press, which began when Robert Knight arrived in the editorial chair of the *Bombay Times* in 1861, new graduates also started to be welcomed into the world of informed public debate (Knight, 2012: 8-11).

The most glaring example of the way in which British colonialists used literature to inculcate allegedly proper behaviour among the natives was given by the works of Reverend Dr William Miller, who, at the turn of the 20th century, was teaching at Madras Christian College. Between 1900 and 1902, he wrote and published commentaries on four great Shakespearean tragedies: *King Lear and Indian Politics*, *Macbeth and the Ruin of Souls*, *Othello and the Crash of Character*, and *Hamlet and the Waste of Life*. These books, which fulfilled the specific purpose of “providing moral instruction and strengthening the supposedly weak colonial character,” were collected in 1905 in an edition entitled *Shakespeare’s Chart of Life* (Kapadia, 1997: 2). As stressed by Kapadia, Miller (and consequently his students) took advantage of Shakespeare’s plays “to express the glories, triumphs, and virtues of the British Empire;” the playwright himself was presented as an “example of supreme cultural achievement” (1997: 3). Shakespeare’s role in India was further attested by the so-called *Book of Homage to Shakespeare*, a testimonial volume which was published in 1916 to commemorate the three-hundredth anniversary of the playwright’s death. It is to be noticed that, among the various tributes from all over the world and in different languages, many of the poems in the collection pertained the British Empire and its imperialism, whose longevity appeared to have been partly responsible for the spreading of Shakespeare worldwide (Kapadia, 1997: 3). A corpus of similar publications was also enriched by the works of some of the English teachers and scholars mentioned in the previous paragraph: some of them published after having returned to the homeland, others contributed volumes while still in India. For example, at the end of the 19th century, the Madras firm of Srinivasa Varadachari released a series of Shakespeare editions to which nearly all the eminent English professors who were in southern India at the time made a significant contribution. On their part, the Indian

youth, whether profiting from the precepts of English literature in real life or not, increasingly decided to specialise in this subject (Chaudhuri, 2016: 3).

By the late 19th century, Shakespeare was present in most urban centres; among the Bengali elites, for instance, watching and studying his plays was considered in vogue, which contributed to spreading a notion of “fashionable” Shakespeare “loved” by all Indians (Singh, 1989: 450). Before the official establishment of English-medium education in 1835, however, English language and literature had already settled in India via the institution of English colonial theatres. As early as the 1750s, the Old Playhouse was founded in Calcutta; it was followed in 1775 by the New Playhouse or Calcutta Theatre. These theatres aimed to keep in accordance with British theatrical styles, so much so that the founders of the Calcutta Theatre addressed 18th-century celebrated British actor David Garrick who, in turn, sent to India both “charming scenery backdrops” prepared under his supervision, and his friend Bernard Messink, an actor who was charged with regulating the new theatre at its outset. All the first theatres had seats reserved for a European clientele only (merchants, missionaries, and officials), so much so that even ushers, ticket collectors, attendants, and actors were hired from Britain. The British, in effect, wanted to reconstruct a truly English playhouse in the colony. Only in the late 19th century, did some theatres, such as the Bengal Theatre, the Great National Theatre, and the National Theatre, begin to open their doors to Indian audiences too. The evolution of the Indian theatrical tradition in the colony, as well as Shakespeare’s engagement with it, is explored in the next section (Kapadia, 1997: 12).

1.2 Shakespeare in Indian theatre

From approximately the 1770s, English troupes made up of famous Shakespearean actors started to regularly stage Shakespearean performances in Indian educational institutions and in public playhouses (Bhatia, 1998: 100-101; Dutta, 2013: 35). Classical Sanskrit theatre had almost disappeared by the 11th century and, owing to a lack of patronage, also folk theatre was in decline, so much so that the period when British drama reached India lacked in native theatrical productions (Thakur, 2012: 4). The Indian folk theatre of the time hardly qualified as legitimate, because it offered either “a medley of all-too familiar didactic tales rehashed from the epics and the *puranas*⁸, or a crude pot-pourri of song, dance, mime and farce.” The introduction of Shakespeare thus

⁸ In the sacred literature of Hinduism, *puranas* is a vast literary genre encompassing myth, legend, genealogy and other traditional cultural knowledge.

“answered to a desperate need for intellectual and psychological stimulus” (Frost, 1992, cited in Sen, 2010: 183-184). Folk and traditional representations were severely attacked by the British for being “licentious”, “immoral,” and “degraded,” then even the educated Indian middle-class started to define them as “degenerate” and in need of cleansing to become “respectable.” According to Thakur, along with the rise of British theatre, the void in native theatrical activity paved the way for the birth of “modern” Indian theatre (2012: 4).

In the early 19th century, the playwright of Stratford, together with other European writers (among whom Homer, Milton, Walter Scott, and the English Romantic poets), influenced decisively Indian native writing. In particular, Homer and Milton contributed to the development of epics along new lines (as in Datta’s *Meghanadavadha*); Walter Scott’s historical novels played an important role in the growth of the Indian novel (as testified to by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s works); English Romantic poets had a decisive influence on Rabindranath Tagore, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 (Sen, 2010: 191-192).

The first English theatre in India was the Old Playhouse, established in Calcutta in 1753; in 1775, it was followed by the New Playhouse, whose repertoire included Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Richard III*, Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal*, and also a mixture of lesser-known 18th-century Western works (Singh, 1989: 448). Several other theatres, smaller in dimensions, were set up in the same period and were run, mainly, by English amateurs. The first half of the 19th century saw the foundation of two major playhouses: the Chowringhee Theatre, co-founded in 1813 by H. H. Wilson, D. L. Richardson, and Dwarkanath, all prominent figures in Indian arts and culture; and the Sans Souci Theatre, established in 1839 then moved to a bigger building in 1841. A private Bengali theatre opened in Calcutta in 1831⁹, while the first public playhouse of the region was founded in 1872 and given the name of National Theatre. After its establishment, a number of other theatres were founded, including the New Star Theatre (1888) and the University Institute Mancha (1891). These playhouses showed considerable European influences: décor, stages, and galleries were westernised, while plays (especially those produced by Tagore, M. Dutt, D. Mitra, and D. Roy) reflected some knowledge of Shakespeare. Nevertheless, Shakespearean works

⁹ This playhouse, founded in a private residence of Calcutta, answered the demands of local Indian newspapers that felt the need of having a theatre like those of the British. It was inaugurated by the staging of a translation of a Sanskrit classical text and by a performance based on selections from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. The audience, however, was still exclusive, because it was composed only by well-known Bengalis and by European officials (Singh, 1989: 452).

were rarely staged in Bengali translation (Sen, 2010: 207-209). In parallel with Bengali theatres, numerous companies were formed in Bombay, Delhi, and other regions too. Their theatres were mostly managed by the Parsi community, they were funded privately, and their productions were written by hired playwrights (Bhatia, 1998: 100). After the third sound of a bell, performances used to start with a prologue in the form of prayer or welcome address by the chorus girls. Girls, however, were not allowed on stage, so all women's roles were played by boys and young men. These actors were trained in singing, dancing, and fencing; their costumes, which indicated the characters' profession, trade, and class, were prepared by expert tailors (from a note in Bhatia, 1998: 119).

Translations of Shakespeare's plays were aimed at non-English-speaking masses, but the most faithful to the originals did not always prove successful for such audiences. For example, the Bengali adaptation of *Macbeth* (1893) by Girish Ghosh, the most famous 19th-century actor in Bengal, failed at the box office in Calcutta, while minor Indianised Shakespearean adaptations (like *Hariraj* from *Hamlet* and *Prabhabati* and *Soudagar* from *The Merchant of Venice*) achieved a conspicuous success in the same city (Sen, 2010: 198).

In a first phase of translations, Shakespeare's plays were adapted to suit Indian tastes. This phase entailed the Indianisation of the characters' names and the addition or omission of some scenes from the playwright's original plots. Shakespeare's most frequently translated works appeared to be tragedies (especially *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*), and comedies (the most popular being *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Comedy of Errors*). History plays, instead, were less commonly performed, because, since they dealt with specific English historical contexts, they did not lend themselves to easy transculturation: by the 1930s, only *Henry IV (1 and 2)* and *Richard III* had been translated into Indian vernacular languages. Tragedies, however, ended unhappily, which was not permitted on the Indian stage; for this reason, conclusions had often to be modified. Other alterations were made through cuts or expansions in order to emphasise certain aspects of the original plots: what made Shakespeare popular in India were the stories on which his works had been built (Sen, 2010: 213-214).

Since the playwright's works "provided a good story with a few romantic and thrilling situations," approximately between 1850 and 1913, on the stages in Bombay, there was a real "craze for Shakespearean drama" (Singh, 1989: 455). Plays were performed in Marathi, Urdu, and Gujarati; the staging of Gujarati productions, in

particular, was initially influenced by the box-office appeal of the Urdu ones, which were free adaptations with very suggestive titles. All were characterised by rhythm (given by language and music, so that, sometimes, as many as forty songs were performed), action, and noise. Moreover, satirical subplots were often added to criticise the ideas and social behaviour of the upper classes (Singh, 1989: 456).

As already stressed, when the British established the first playhouses in India, they aimed at an exclusively British clientele. For example, in Calcutta's theatres, audiences were composed by British officers, merchants, scholars, and clerks of the East India Company (Singh, 1989: 445). Moreover, owing to the colonisers' position of supremacy, the natives were not involved in any theatrical activity, not even as ushers or door-keepers. In August 1848, however, a Bengali actor, Baishnav Charan Adhya (nicknamed Addy) performed *Othello* at the Sans Souci Theatre in Calcutta in an adaptation directed by James Barry. The peculiarity of his staging was that he played in an all-English cast, in which Desdemona was interpreted by the daughter of Mrs Leach, a renowned English actress in town. Another noteworthy detail of this production was that, probably, Adhya was not chosen for his theatrical talent, but for his black complexion, which made him suitable to the role: an English newspaper of the time, the *Calcutta Star*, called him a "real unpainted nigger" who set "the whole world of Calcutta agog" (from a quotation in Thakur, 2012: 3). While provoking consternation among the British, Adhya's role was seen as a triumph on the part of colonised Bengalis, and represented a tell-tale sign of what was about to be the first phase of Indian appropriations of Shakespeare. As the colonial policy of promotion of English language and culture was introduced, also Indian aristocracy was gradually allowed to access Calcutta's theatres (Singh, 1989: 449; Kapadia, 1997: 48; Chaudhuri, 2016: 2).

After 1947, government-sponsored agencies, theatre groups, and touring companies from Britain succeeded in maintaining Shakespeare studies and Shakespearean performances present and active throughout the whole country, thus keeping alive the myth of his "cultural superiority" (Bhatia, 1998: 103). A leading company was Geoffrey Kendal's Shakespeareana, which, hosted and encouraged by state governments, performed Shakespeare's plays all over India even after subcontinental partition had occurred. Their touring became the main subject of James Ivory's film *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965), this being a symbolic pidgin name that had been attributed to Kendal himself, thus combining his "Western literary genius" and the "Eastern entertainment trade." In the movie, Kendal and his family interpreted

themselves under the fictional name of “Buckingham” playing company (Dutta, 2013: 43). Shakespeareana company began their “princely tour” of India at St. Xavier’s College in Bombay by presenting a full production of *The Merchant of Venice* and some scenes from *Macbeth*; Kendal then continued his theatrical activity by performing mainly in schools, colleges, and universities. In his productions, local musicians would play Elizabethan English songs with their Indian flutes and sitars; at times, also costumes were local, thus favouring the blending of the two cultures. It is outstanding that, between June 1953 and December 1956 alone, Shakespeareana managed to stage 879 Shakespearean performances (Kapadia, 1997: 49; Chaudhuri, 2016: 6).

In addition to British companies, in the 1950s and 1960s the Indian government gave patronage to indigenous productions, hence staged by government-supported companies like Delhi’s Little Theatre Group. In these decades, performances like Harivansh Rai Bachchan’s Hindi translations of *Macbeth* and *Othello* contributed to a further valorisation of Shakespeare (Bhatia, 1998: 104).

The majority of Shakespearean plays disappeared from Indian stages between the 1910s and the 1920s, a period defined as “dark stage.” Scholars, however, do not agree on the dates of its inception and end. Charles Sisson makes “dark stage” depart in 1912, while Harish Trivedi indicates it in the aftermath of World War I; the former perceives the decline as a reaction against British literature and culture, the latter as the consequence of the spreading of “Gandhian nationalism.” For Joytsna Singh, instead, Bengali plays started to supplant Shakespearean ones in 1920 as part and parcel of the new nationalistic project. For Singh, Shakespeare was reintroduced in 1940, for other scholars in 1947, the year of the declaration of independence from the British Raj (García-Periago, 2012: 55-56). Chaudhuri cites two other causes of decline: either the influence of newer theatrical modes, like Ibsen’s, Shaw’s, and Brecht’s, or, more simply, the exhaustion of Shakespearean vein. A striking case is that of adaptations in Marathi: 65 between 1867 and 1915; only two in the next forty years (2016: 5).

Generally speaking, it is agreed that Shakespeare reappeared in postcolonial Bengal in 1948, when he was commonly associated with the name of Utpal Dutt, a renowned Bengali actor and director. The new productions of the 1950s broadened their target audiences and reflected the social and political realities of the time. In effect, as Dutt himself claimed, “the classics were not a prerogative of an élite;” were they not brought to the people, “they would cease to exist” (cited in Singh, 1989: 454-455). Dutt had received a Jesuit education (then rejected), while his theatrical training derived from

touring with Kendal's Shakespeareana in 1947. Once independence was gained, he joined the Amateur Shakespeareans (then renamed Little Theatre Group) and, each month, he produced a new Shakespearean play in which he always performed the leading role (some examples are versions of *Othello*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Hamlet*). By accompanying a political article with a fragment of *Romeo and Juliet*, in March 1948 his theatrical group reacted to the banning of the Communist Party of India. Moreover, they "realized that they could not presume to be radical so long as they continued to perform plays exclusively for a minority audience, the Westernized intellectuals of Calcutta" (Singh, 1989: 454-455)¹⁰. Dutt's ideals materialised in 1950, when the director became a member of the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA), an anti-imperialistic and anti-fascist theatrical group formed in 1943. After the IPTA parenthesis, in 1951 Dutt returned to the Little Theatre Group, which he radically changed: the company started to perform only in Bengali for a largely working-class audience, and they toured different remote areas and rural villages of the region by staging their Bengali version of *Macbeth* (1970). With this play, Dutt immersed Shakespeare in Jatra, the lively folk theatre of Bengal characterised by religious fervour and rhythmic gestures, thus introducing the playwright of Stratford to all those villagers that had not been part of the colonial process of education. Though not motivated by comparable strong political ideals, even other regional contemporary adaptations of Shakespeare's plays centred on popular taste and were specifically directed at people (Singh, 1989: 454-455).

For Shakespeare's Quatercentenary of 1964, Dutt directed three Shakespearean adaptations in Bengali: *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. These were performed at the Minerva Theatre, a playhouse founded in Calcutta in 1893 and renovated in 1925 after having suffered a fire three years before. In these productions, the director distanced himself from his predecessors, who used to stage "tradaptations," that is, "extremely free translations with a considerable number of alterations" (García-Periago, 2012: 62); he did so by not modifying the originals too much. Ironically, his characters spoke Bengali, but they preserved original Shakespearean names and wore Western costumes; also scenery was conventional. The "Indianisation," or "vernacularisation," of Shakespeare reached its apogee in 1970, with

¹⁰ As explained in a note from García-Periago, the non-Bengali members of the company, mainly from Westernised Jewish families with a British education, left the group for Australia or Israel. They were replaced by other Bengalis (2012: 61).

the already-mentioned production of *Macbeth* that Dutt made according to Jatra theatre standards (García-Periago, 2012: 62-63; 65-66).

1.2.1 Shakespeare in Parsi theatre

Parsis, the most “Westernised” community in Bombay¹¹, migrated from Persia to western India over a millennium ago, both to avoid Islamic persecution and probably to grasp trading opportunities in that part of the subcontinent. They were practitioners of the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism and, once settled in India, they engaged in shipping and shipbuilding, making profit especially after the arrival of European trading powers in the 17th century (first the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and finally the British). Parsi success in commerce became unparalleled, and they were also pioneers in education, social reform, and medicine. They were the alleged leaders of the Indian industrial revolution, and they stood out in the fields of banking, law, journalism, and politics too. What is most relevant here is Parsi engagement with Indian theatre and Shakespeare’s plays, as well as their role in the inception of Indian Shakespearean cinema (Hinnells and Williams, 2008: 1-2; Sen, 2010: 215).

Somnath Gupt, in *The Parsi Theatre*, explains that “[t]he phrase ‘Parsi theatre’ signifies the playhouses built and operated by the Parsi community, along with Parsi playwrights, Parsi dramas, Parsi stages, Parsi theatrical companies, Parsi actors, Parsi directors, and so on” (cited in Thakur, 2014: 23-24). Parsi theatre also counted in its number those non-Parsi playwrights and actors who worked on a salaried basis for Parsis themselves. Even the companies who added the words “of Bombay” to their names in order to show their connection to Parsis (though not being Parsis, nor being settled in Bombay) can be included in the definition of “Parsi theatre” (Thakur, 2014: 23-24).

The date of its inception was 1846, the opening of Bombay’s Grant Road Theatre, whose lively commercial and middle-class neighbourhood provided it with a native audience. This new audience seemed to prefer melodramas and farces¹², while, in terms of language, Urdu/Hindustani was required. Initially, Parsi playwrights used English in their scripts, then they turned to Gujarati; around 1860, when they started to adopt Urdu/Hindustani, the trend began to change for translations too. The first Urdu

¹¹ Hinnells and Williams, in the introduction to their *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, claim that Parsis were probably the most Westernised community in the whole of South Asia (2008: 2).

¹² According to Gupt, the Indian taste for melodrama and farce derived from the English theatre of the time, where those kinds of drama were most frequently performed (Thakur, 2012: 5).

adaptation of a Shakespearean play was Edalji Khori's *Sone ke Mul ki Khurshed* (1871), directed by Dadi Patel for the Victoria Theatrical Company at the Victoria Theatre; its translation in Urdu was made by Behramji Firdunji Merzban (Thakur, 2014: 26).

By 1853, the example of Parsi theatre led to the formation of a Hindu Dramatic Corps, a group that aimed to produce plays similar to Parsi ones but in Marathi; as a consequence, the two theatrical corps influenced one another, and were both significant for the formation of what came to be Indian national culture. Parsi theatre became professional in the 1870s; as a consequence, theatrical companies grew quickly and conspicuously. These companies were managed by different directors, but they all shared common features of subject and style: melodramatic and sensational plots, song and dance sequences, spectacle and display of technology (Sen, 2010: 216; Thakur, 2014: 24-25). Parsi theatres also used to tour extensively (in India, the Far East, London, and also parts of Africa), which made their troupes the most outstanding and cosmopolitan in the whole Indian subcontinent (from a note in Sen, 2010: 217).

During their most productive period, rivalry and competition were common: tricks, like the hiring of bands of claque to either applaud or jeer performances, props, like painted curtains, and stage effects, like aerial movements to enhance shows or make them more realistic, led to considerable expenses to make productions the most attractive (Thakur, 2014: 25-26). Parsi repertoire was diversified, and it encompassed English drama, tales from Arabian and Persian folklore (including the *Arabian Nights*), the *Mahabharata* (a major Sanskrit epic), and original plays. Folk and classical forms of songs, like *khayal*, *bhavai*, *garba*, and *lavani*¹³, were an integral part of representations, and Shakespeare himself was freely adapted (Sen, 2010: 216). As Thakur underlines, "Shakespeare provided Parsi theatre the necessary material to cater to the needs of [its] audience in terms of action, spectacle, rhetoric, declamation, and thrill of Parsi theatre in turn popularized Shakespeare among the masses" (2014: 27). According to Yajnik, by 1934 over 200 Shakespearean adaptations were produced in various Indian languages, but they might be many more, because most Parsi play scripts are now lost or extremely difficult to access (Sen, 2010: 185; 217-218; Thakur, 2014: 27).

In terms of Shakespearean productions, the age of Parsi theatre (1870s-1920s) was the most prolific in India and the relationship between Shakespeare and Parsis was

¹³ *Khayal* is a form of north-Indian classical music that literally means "imagination." This style of singing originated in opposition to *Dhrupada*, which had rigorous and fixed rules. *Bhavai* is a folk drama, while *garba* is a folk dance of Gujarat. *Lavani* is a folk dance of Maharashtra (note from Thakur, 2014: 40).

particularly fruitful (Thakur, 2012: 5-6). In Bombay, where the English-literate population was small, Parsis tended to present Shakespeare to local audiences by indigenising his plays and recurring to performative transculturation. Hence, Parsi performances usually followed Indian folk and popular theatrical traditions: even when the development of Shakespeare's plots was left unchanged, new adaptations began with hymns to Hindu gods, had repertoires of songs and dances, and made use of costumes which combined features of Western and Indian attire. Great liberties were taken, so much so that Shakespeare was also used to express anti-colonial feelings. Parsi Shakespearean plays, however, remained mostly apolitical, not aimed to propagate any political ideology but performed for mere entertainment (Bhatia, 1998: 100; Sen, 2010: 209; 215; 218-219). Linguistically, one way of indigenising the playwright was by using the rhyming-prose style of early 19th-century Hindi/Urdu literature, so as to interlace the original lines of plays with familiar quotations from local poets. Another interesting practice probably consisted in summarising each scene if spectators knew none of the idioms normally used for performance: these kinds of scene summaries were a usual procedure in London as well. This practice pleased particularly Parsi audiences, which were generally composed of Indian citizens who had not had the opportunity to have access to Shakespeare's plays either through the educational curriculum or through elite theatres (Bhatia, 1998: 100; Sen, 2010: 219; 222).

In their productions, Parsi playwrights usually added new scenes (especially of thrill, intrigue, and murder) and dropped those that seemed not to be fit for their design; for instance, in Karimuddin Murad's version of *Pericles (Khudadad)*, the father-daughter incest was eliminated because it did not conform to Indian sensibility. On the contrary, Shakespearean scenes of pathos were exploited to the fullest, and also new pathetic episodes were incorporated, so as to make the characters' virtues shine more than in the original plots. In this sense, Parsi drama could be described as a drama of "episodic intensification," which is the same phrase Schücking used to refer to the playwright's plays themselves. Shakespearean tragedies were generally changed in their conclusion by the insertion of a happy ending, maybe because tragedy was not contemplated as a genre in Indian classical and folk theatre. For instance, both Munshi Murad Alli's *Hara-Jita* and Agha Hashar Kashmiri's *Safed-Khun* followed the original text of *King Lear*, but both ended happily with the reunion of Lear and Cordelia and the coronation of the latter; Mehar Hasan's *Bazme Fani* transformed *Romeo and Juliet* into a tragicomedy in three acts; Joseph David's *Kali Nagin* adapted *Antony and Cleopatra*

but made it end with Antony regaining his throne and reuniting with his family. Broadly speaking, the idea of the romantic comedy, which culminated with the marriage of the two young lovers/protagonists, prevailed (Verma, 2005: 275; Thakur, 2012: 6; Thakur, 2014: 29).

Music, which encompassed songs and dances, was part and parcel of Parsi theatre, so much so that even fighting heroes and dying heroines used to sing on stage. “[T]he addiction to songs grew to such an extent that occasions of joy, deaths, wars, and dialogues were all accompanied by singing” and Parsi theatre itself was referred to as “opera” (Gupt, 2005, quoted in Thakur, 2012: 7). Lyrics were printed in the so-called “opera book” and were usually given to the audience, who then enjoyed singing their favourite songs. Music programs included both Indian classical music and Western pieces. When spectators were particularly amused, they would shout “Once more!” and ask players to re-enact the action they had just seen. If the request was repeated twice or three times, the audience was satisfied, and the scene was staged again, even if this meant making characters recently killed in combat rise from the floor and begin to fight again. This craze for music necessitated the presence of trained classical singers who were also able to act; the most popular of them were Amir Jan, Moti Jan, Gohar Jan and Munnibai. Probably due to financial issues, at the beginning few props and few pieces of furniture were used, and painted curtains hung on stage to make the setting appear more real. Only when Parsi theatre started to make high profits, did rivalries grow among theatre managers, and thousands of rupees were spent for scenic effects and stunning costumes, which were also made appropriate to the historical and cultural contexts represented. First, Western painters coming directly from Europe, then, Indian local artists were commissioned to depict stage curtains: famous painters like Hussain Buksh were even advertised on playbills (Thakur, 2012: 7).

Over time, Parsi managers succeeded in setting up a network of diverse theatrical companies across India, whose sensational spectacles and popularity anticipated the “modern” Indian popular cinema. Both Parsi theatre and cinema had such an expansion that they became cultural phenomena of subcontinental proportions; stage was thus perceived as a lucrative career option, while playwriting became a thriving industry. Most importantly, even though some intellectuals accused Parsis of debasing Shakespeare, all in all “Parsi companies might have ensured the biggest and most widely circulated presence of [the playwright] ever within the Indian theatrical scene” (Chaudhuri, 2016: 5). Though several companies remained active until the

1950s, Parsi theatre's decline started in the 1920s, precisely due to the rise of Indian popular cinema (Malick, 2005: 92; Chaudhuri, 2016: 5).

1.3 Shakespeare in Indian cinema

Since its earliest days, cinema has been interested in Shakespeare and, as already made clear in the introduction to this dissertation, cinematic adaptations of his plays have not been limited to the West. Also many Indian directors found, and still find, their source of inspiration in Shakespearean works (Sultana, 2014: 50). A renewal of Indian cinema's interest into the playwright of Stratford has recently been brought about by Vishal Bhardwaj's hit trilogy, the main subject of my study. Its influence is witnessed by the production of other recent Shakespearean movies, such as Sharat Katariya's *10ml Love* (2010), based on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Habib Faisal's *Ishaqzaade* (2012) and Manish Tiwary's *Issaq* (2013), based on *Romeo and Juliet* (Sultana, 2014: 53).

In general, Shakespeare's presence in the Indian film industry is revealed by both direct adaptations of his plays and by Shakespearean motifs. For example, in several Bombay films some comic female characters (like Julia, Rosalind, Viola, and Imogen) have functioned as the prototypes of the heroine in disguise, while a character like Portia has been frequently reinterpreted as the heroine-as-lawyer, traditionally in the concluding courtroom scene typical of many Indian movies. Common themes, instead, have been the "Romeo and Juliet" story, the "Two Gentlemen/Two Noble Kinsmen" motif of two friends in love with the same girl, and the most popular motif of taming, like in *The Taming of the Shrew*, a comedy which has undergone many transformations. As reported by Sultana, literary pundits have claimed that "Bollywood may have struggled had there been no Shakespeare to inspire and borrow from;" others, on the contrary, have replied that the existential and philosophical elements found in Shakespearean plays already existed in Indian epics (Verma, 2005: 283; Gruss, 2009: 226; Sultana, 2014: 53). In any case, except for a fallow period between Indian independence and approximately 1980, the Indian tradition of adapting Shakespeare's works on screen has continued to the present day (Sen, 2010: 193).

The earliest period of Shakespearean influence to Indian cinema, which Verma defines as "appropriative phase," covered the time span between the silent era (1913-1930) and the mid-1950s. The whole phase, which appeared to be more prolific in the 1930s, was dominated by cinematic adaptations in the Parsi theatre mode (Verma, 2012:

83-84). As the first Shakespearean films in the West were based mainly on stage performances, also the earliest Indian Shakespearean movies seemed to be based on Parsi theatrical adaptations. This initial set of films included silent versions of plays like *The Merchant of Venice* (*Dil Farosh*¹⁴ of 1927) and *Hamlet* (*Khoon-e-Nahak* of 1928). Another good example in the cinematic corpus of the first phase was Sohrab Modi's *Hamlet* (1935), which was shot following the director's own theatre company's version of Shakespeare's tragedy, *Khoon-ka-Khoon*, one of the most popular Urdu plays staged by Parsis. One major difference between Western and Indian appropriative modes lay in their respective approach to the Shakespearean text: while Western directors used the playwright's scripts as their point of reference, Indian earliest filmmakers tended to loosely follow only Parsi adaptations; in some cases, it was basically through these adaptations that some members of the audience came into contact with the playwright's originals (if at all) (Verma, 2012: 83-84).

Verma, however, remarks that the connection between Parsi theatre and Shakespeare, though being undoubtedly relevant, has not to be misrepresented. Parsis, in fact, rather than adapting the playwright's plays, mainly appropriated them, thus inserting specific Shakespearean scenes or episodes in sequences narrating totally different happenings (2012: 84). According to Julie Sanders, an "adaptation" can be defined as "a transpositional practice, casting a specific genre into another generic mode, an act of re-vision in itself" which can consist in an amplification "engaged in addition, expansion, accretion, and interpolation" (2006: 18). By contrast, the scholar describes "appropriation" as frequently implying "a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (2006: 26). This appropriative mode characteristic of Parsi theatre may be detected in Agha Hashr Kashmiri's both *Said-e-Havas* (1907) and *Khwab-e-Hasti* (1908), later turned into films by the already-mentioned Sohrab Modi, credited as "the man who brought Shakespeare on the Indian screen" (from a quotation in Trivedi, 2007: 149). In *Khwab-e-Hasti*, the sole reference to Shakespeare was a close, almost literal, translation of *Macbeth*'s sleepwalking scene, together with some allusions to Lady Macbeth's chastisement of her husband with the "valour of her tongue" (*Macbeth*, 1.5.30); in *Said-e-Havas*, the play presented a nearly identical version of *King John*'s scenes related to Hubert and Arthur and some tenuous connections to *Richard III* (Verma, 2012: 84-85). In the

¹⁴ *Dil Farosh*, a silent movie produced by the Excelsior Film Company under the direction of Udvadia, is supposed to be the first screen version of a Parsi theatre adaptation (Verma, 2005: 270).

English context, excerpts from *King John*, an allegedly unknown play, were made into a film in 1899 by Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree and are considered to be the first film ever made anywhere on a Shakespearean work; Kashmiri, however, was unlikely to have seen this British cinematic production. In pre-independence India, a certain interest in history plays was probably aroused by an evolving national consciousness, but evidence would show that, in this case, the unusual choice of *King John* depended exclusively on contingent factors (Verma, 2012: 85).

In the field of Shakespearean adaptations, and especially in terms of screen versions of the playwright's works, various scholars have distinguished among the different modes of adapting and appropriating plays. As Verma (2012) is the main source for this section of my dissertation, I take into consideration Rothwell's categorisation, which is the one Verma himself quoted in his essay. In his *History of Shakespeare on Screen*, Rothwell analyses films based on Shakespeare's plays and divides them in adaptations and derivatives. According to him, "adaptations in English rely heavily on Shakespeare's actual words, [while] derivatives abandon his language altogether" (Rothwell, 2004: 209). Foreign adaptations, including Indian ones, are not part of this definition; for Verma, however, Shakespearean movies based on Parsi theatre are ascribable among derivatives, particularly in the fifth (of seven) category, that of "parasitical derivatives." Parasitical derivatives "exploit Shakespeare for embellishment, and/or graft brief visual or verbal quotations onto an otherwise unrelated scenario" (Rothwell, 2004: 209; Verma, 2012: 85). The other six categories are, in order: "recontextualizations" (1st), which keep Shakespearean plots but move them to new eras and discard the Elizabethan language; "mirror movies" (2nd), which parallel a plot concerning the troubled lives of a group of actors with the plot of the Shakespearean play these actors are appearing in; "dance/music" (3rd), which means musicals, ballets, and operas; "revues" (4th), which put Shakespearean scenes on display by using the excuse of a biography, a documentary, or even a horror show; "animations" (6th), which transform Shakespeare's scenes into cartoon images; "documentaries" and "educational films" (7th), that is a variety of pedagogical movies (Rothwell, 2004: 209).

Categorised as "parasitical" by Verma, the Indian films of 1920-1950 derived their plots from different multicultural sources, among which the playwright was only one: ancient epics (like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*), romance, courtly intrigues, historical episodes, and the lives of saints were some of the others. In addition

to this, the protagonists of the mainstream Indian movies of the 1930s and 1940s were sometimes foreigners or members of minority groups, which would be extremely unlikely in later productions (Verma, 2012: 85-86). Three noteworthy Urdu films in the Parsi theatre mode were: Sohrab Modi's *Hamlet*, alias *Khoon-ka-Khoon* (1935), Akhtar Hussain's *Romeo and Juliet* (1947), and Kishore Sahu's *Hamlet* (1954). Though frequently alluding to diverse Indian texts (mainly classics of Urdu poetry), these productions first attempted to adapt rather than appropriate Shakespeare's plays. Sahu's *Hamlet*, in particular, brought the Parsi theatre tradition of Shakespearean appropriations to an end: neither action nor characters' names were Indianised, and costumes, setting, and locale were made as authentic as possible, so much so that "no other Indian Shakespeare film has come so close to suggesting an Elizabethan/Western ambience" (Trivedi, 2007: 150). Moreover, several reviewers noticed a certain influence from Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948); in effect, Shakespeare entered the cinematic world of Bombay also through Shakespearean adaptations from England and Hollywood. The movies of the 1930s and 1940s were the first talkies, so that Shakespeare's rhetoric, which already circulated on theatre stages, started to be exploited in cinema too (Verma, 2005: 279; Trivedi, 2007: 148; 150; Verma, 2012: 89).

In the next, "assimilative," phase, distinguished by films assimilating Shakespearean drama into the Indian context by updating it to the present and "domesticating" the plays' storylines within India (Allen, 2014: 170), adaptations of *The Comedy of Errors* prevailed. Three outstanding movies were: *Bhrantibilas* (1963), Debu Sen's *Do Dooni Chaar* (1968), and Gulzar's *Angeer* (1982). Except for the modern setting, *Bhrantibilas* was based on Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's 19th-century prose narrative of the same title; Vidyasagar was credited as the author, while Shakespeare's name was totally omitted. Though still unlocalised and unhistoricised, the other two movies had a contemporary setting too. Whilst none of them managed to accommodate the Ephesian law against the Syracusans, all three productions took the setting for granted and never foregrounded it (Verma, 2012: 90). In *Angeer*, which imported Shakespeare's plot into an actual modern-day drama, characters and events all alluded to the original play, whereas songs, sung by Luciana's Indian counterpart, and parodies of old Hindi songs, composed by one of the Indian Dromios, derived from other movies (Dutta, 2013: 44-45). Gulzar's movie, announced as a comedy of twins without mentioning Shakespeare, has been by far the most commercially successful Shakespearean film in India. With regards to giving due credit to Shakespeare, when the

playwright was mentioned as the main source of a production, this seemed to discourage moviegoers from going to the cinema, because they would perceive the film as “forbiddingly highbrow” (Verma, 2005: 285).

The third phase of Shakespearean cinema in India was heralded by Shakespeare film renaissance in England and at Hollywood in the 1990s, an era characterised by potentially box-office movies with star-studded casts. Cinematic productions from the third phase were consciously and actively engaged with the playwright’s originals, with which they entertained a relationship of mutual exchange. Two examples are Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Maqbool* (2003), set in the underworld of Bombay, and Rituparno Ghosh’s *The Last Lear* (2007), an English film centred on an old, retired stage-actor finally convinced to play the main role in the production of a young and ambitious filmmaker. As the second phase was dominated by *The Comedy of Errors*, since the 1990s *Othello* has prevailed. The latest noteworthy screen versions of this tragedy are: Jayaraj’s *Kalyattam* (1997), Royston Abel’s *In Othello* (2003), and Bhardwaj’s *Omkara* (2006), set in the gangster world of Western Uttar Pradesh. In India, *Othello*, in addition to being regarded as the most popular Shakespearean tragedy, has also been deemed as a “tragedy of caste.” However, the issue of caste, excluded from the national census in 1931, is mainly absent from Indian popular cinema; not even nicknames are used to reveal a character’s caste. Crucial factors are rather class and region (Verma, 2012: 90-92).

As the next chapter shows, nowadays, along with specific cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare’s works, also common Bollywood mainstream productions appear to be “bluntly Shakespeareanesque” in their temperament: similarly to Shakespeare’s plays, Hindi movies feature “love triangles, comedy, melodrama, star-crossed lovers, angry parents, conniving villains, convenient coincidences, and mistaken identities” (Dutta, 2013: 36). Shakespeare and Bollywood movies thus seem to almost coincide, especially “in democratic parity, in their deployment of similar strategies and conventions - formulaic plots, stock characters, inflated rhetoric, song and dance, and spectacle” (Chakravarti, 2014: 131).

Chapter 2

The Indian Film Industry: From Parsi Theatre to Bollywood

2.1 Sources and definitions of the term “Bollywood”

Shakespeare’s involvement in Indian cinema has been going on for about a century. In this regard, various scholars have recently investigated the category of “Bollywood Shakespeare,” so as to reflect “the growing interest in Shakespearean themes within the mainstream Bombay(now Mumbai)-based film industry of India which typically makes popular Hindi movies with melodramatic plots, non-naturalistic narration, stock characters, music and dancing” (Paromita Chakravarti cited in Thakur, 2014: 22).

The term “Bollywood” was allegedly created by the English language press in India in the late 1970s as a “tongue-in-cheek referent” combining Bombay with Hollywood (Shahani and Charry, 2014: 161). In opposition to this, Madhava Prasad (2003) has proposed another interesting word-origin. According to the film critic, “Bollywood” could derive from the older term “Tollywood,” which was used for the first time to refer to the Tollygunge film industry area of Calcutta in a telegram that the American producer Wilford E. Deming received in 1932 as he was about to leave India (cited in Mishra, 2008: 472). In any case, this word has had an entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* since 2001¹⁵, thus entering officially the English lexicon, and it has then spread worldwide to refer to the Bombay-located film industry, which is “aesthetically and culturally different from Hollywood, but as prolific and ubiquitous in its production and circulation of narratives and images” (Ganti, 2004: 2).

The sobriquet “Bollywood” has been far more enduring than other seemingly more respectable appellations like “Bombay cinema,” “Hindi cinema,” or the somewhat vague and misleading “Indian popular cinema.” According to Ashish Rajadhyaksha, not only does this uniquely Indian “Epico-Mythico-Tragico-Comico-Super-Sexy-High-Masala Art” (as defined by Salman Rushdie) encompass film industry, it also involves other distribution and consumption activities, namely websites, music cassettes, cable and radio (cited in Shahani and Charry, 2014: 162).

Nowadays, Bollywood films constitute approximately 25-30 percent of the total production of Indian cinema, whose overall output makes India “the largest feature-film

¹⁵ Shahani and Charry report that in the edition of 2005 of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term “Bollywood” was defined as “[a] name for the Indian popular film industry, based in Bombay. Origin 1970s. Blend of Bombay and Hollywood” (2014: 161).

producing country in the world” (Ganti, 2004: 3; Shoesmith, 2008: 74). This percentage corresponds to 150-200 Hindi films a year: these are deemed to be the archetypes to either follow or oppose and these are the ones to circulate both nationally and internationally. Still talking about numbers, from the advent of sound in 1931 to the first decade of the 21st century, some 10,000 Bollywood films were produced; the average output of the whole Indian cinematic industry is at least five times higher (Mishra, 2008: 471).

In sum, “Bollywood” refers to a specific style of filmmaking that is oriented towards box-office success and broad audience appeal. Its distinctive features encompass song and dance, melodrama and lavish production values, and it tends to emphasise stars and spectacle. Ironically enough, Dwyer and Patel have noted that a special public attention to Hindi filmmaking has occurred right at the moment of its decline, when Hollywood movie scripts started to be plagiarised by the Bombay industry; in fact, the “golden age” of Hindi films is said to have ended in the 1970s (cited in Burt, 2003: 269-270). Nevertheless, Bollywood is still dominant in the broader Indian cinematic industry, whose heterogeneity and long history are explored in this chapter.

2.2 The origins and development of Indian cinema¹⁶

The history of Indian cinema can be traced back to the late 19th - early 20th century, when India was still a colony of the British Empire. It is noteworthy that even under the British dominion, India already ranked third among the producers of films in the world (Ganti, 2004: 3; Chatterjee, 2016: 110).

2.2.1 Photography and early cinema

The closest precursor to motion picture technology was photography, which, after having been announced in Europe, was first employed in India in 1840, when it was immediately adopted by amateurs and aspiring professionals. In the mid-1850s, many photo studios were opened in cities like Bombay and Calcutta; in the following 20-30 years, these studios spread so much so that hundreds of them were disseminated throughout the whole country (Ganti, 2004: 6).

¹⁶ All historical information provided by this chapter is based on Ganti’s detailed introduction in her *Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema* (2004), on Bose’s *Bollywood: A History* (2006), and on Willemsen and Rajadhyaksha’s chronicle in their *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* (1998).

The direct offspring of photography, that is, motion picture technology, is said to have been introduced into the Indian subcontinent on 7 July 1896, when Marius Sestier, the cameraman of the French, Paris-based, Lumière brothers screened the first motion pictures at Watson's Hotel in Bombay. Such a cinematographic show was presented while Sestier was on his way to Australia, only a few months after its premiere in the French capital. The first Indian spectacle, which also coincided with the first screening to the Tsar of Russia in St. Petersburg, was advertised in the *Times of India* newspaper as both "marvel" and "wonder of the world," but only Europeans were allowed to attend it. Shows open to Indians began a week later at the Novelty Theatre in Bombay. Indian photographers welcomed these motion pictures enthusiastically, then, after purchasing cameras, they started filming shorts to be shown in tents, playgrounds, and public halls (Ganti, 2004: 6-7; Bose, 2006: 39).

In addition to being the main centre of commerce and manufacturing in British India and a trading gateway since its foundation by the British East India Company in the 17th century, Bombay thus became the site of the first screenings of motion pictures and subsequently the heart of film production in the Indian subcontinent. Moreover, the city served as the set for one of the first made-in-India movies, that is, a wrestling match fought in the city's Hanging Gardens and shot by Save Dada, an already professional still-photographer who had been dazzled by the Lumières' invention. Bombay's development into a film-production location was helped by its colonial and commercial status; as a matter of fact, the city's industrial and trading activities provided the necessary capital for film technology. It is also to be reckoned that Bombay had been the cradle of Parsi theatre, a commercial mid-19th-century theatre movement sponsored by Parsi traders, who belonged to the leading business community in the Bombay Presidency (Ganti, 2004: 7; Bose, 2006: 42).

2.2.2 The influence of Parsi theatre

As explained in detail in chapter 1.2.1, the Parsi theatrical tradition of adapting Shakespearean plays has continued in Indian cinema, especially with post-independence Hindi films. One of the reasons why Parsi groups are specifically related to Bollywood is that they were its initial providers of both performers and writers: the majority of those Parsis who were involved in drama soon switched from theatre to cinema. In this way, popular Hindi cinema, of which Parsi is considered to be the immediate aesthetic and cultural antecedent, rapidly assimilated diverse Parsi influences. Shakespeare,

Persian lyric poetry, lyric folk traditions, and Sanskrit drama, together with songs integrated into narrative, historical and mythological genres, romantic melodrama, and the use of the Urdu language, all merged into new cinematic adaptations. Furthermore, until the 1930s the Indian film industry was supported by Parsi capital, which had a pivotal role also in the establishment and development of the three major sound and silent studios of the time, namely Imperial Film, Minerva Movietone, and Wadia Movietone (Ganti, 2004: 8; Shahani and Charry, 2014: 161).

2.2.3 The silent era

One of the earliest pioneers in Indian cinema was Dhundiraj Govind Phalke (1870-1944), commonly known as Dadasaheb Phalke, or the “Father of Indian cinema.” Phalke, academically trained in fine art and architecture, was actually interested in a range of visual arts and technologies, so that he also studied photography, photolithography, and ceramics. He is known as a filmmaker, but he also worked as a portrait photographer, a stage makeup man, a magician, and even as the helper of a German illusionist (Ganti, 2004: 8).

For Phalke, seeing *The Life of Christ* at the American-Indian Picture Palace in Bombay in 1910 was a transformative experience that sparked his interest in film. “[G]ripped by a strange spell,” he was spurred to watch it two consecutive times, feeling “[his] imagination taking shape on the screen” and keeping wondering whether it could be possible to see Indian images and gods on the screen too (cited in Ganti, 2004: 9). In terms of socio-political beliefs, Phalke’s thoughts and nationalist intentions were shaped by the anticolonial struggles against the British. These concerns prompted him to aspire to the creation of an indigenous film industry: he tried to make explicit the links between filmmaking, politics and Indian statehood by seeking support from Indian business and political leaders (Ganti, 2004: 9).

After raising money with a short film in time-lapse photography entitled *Birth of a Pea Plant*, in which he shot one frame a day to show a pea growing in a pea-laden plant, in 1912 Phalke went to London, where he acquired both knowledge of film technology and equipment. Back to Bombay, he founded Phalke Films, for which he produced five movies. His initial capital derived from a loan against his insurance policy, while the company’s staff was recruited among his family members and friends. The following year, Phalke Films moved 200 kilometres east of Bombay, to Nashik, an

ancient pilgrimage town that gave the filmmaker easier access to natural locations, such as rivers and mountains, and to several famous temples (Ganti, 2004: 9).

As Chatterjee asserts, the “history [of Indian cinema] was actually created by Harish Chandra” (2016: 110). In effect, Phalke’s *Raja Harischandra* (“King Harischandra”), which made its debut in Bombay’s Coronation Cinematograph Theatre in 1913, is generally considered the first Indian feature film (over 3,500 feet, as stated in Desai and Dudrah, 2008: 5). *Pundalik*, a popular Hindu drama relating the story of a Maharashtrian saint, was filmed one year before, but it is not usually regarded as the first Indian feature film because it was a stage play rather than a specific creation for the screen. Based on a story from the epic narrative *Mahabharata*, *Raja Harischandra* was instead revered as “the first film of Indian manufacture,” so much so that, unusually for the time, it ran in Bombay for an entire month¹⁷. With this production, Phalke inaugurated the so-called “mythologicals,” a popular Indian genre which brings to life stories of the Hindu pantheon. In effect, in order to make cinematic experience more familiar to audiences, in the early years of Indian cinema movies were frequently based on renowned Hindu epic poems and myths. Since 1987, these mythologicals have been thriving in serialised TV formats (Ganti, 2004: 10).

Aiming to organise trade shows and find new cinematic equipment, Phalke returned to England in 1914. Once in India again, he closed down his Phalke Films and, in 1918, established Hindustan Cinema Films Company, the first purely indigenous film studio, with at least six other filmmakers apart from himself. This new studio produced 44 silent features, several short films, and also one talkie, before failing in 1933. Its founder died eleven years later in Nashik, penniless and forgotten. Only in 1966, his distinguished career was recognised via the institution of the Dadasaheb Phalke Lifetime Achievement Awards (Ganti, 2004: 10).

Phalke allegedly opened the way for Indian cinema and the so-called “silent era.” The early silent films were made in Bombay and Calcutta; other minor locations (such as Nashik and Hyderabad), instead, created the first possibilities for the emergence of regional cinemas. The elevated profitability of filmmaking enabled the first directors to reinvest their gains in new productions and to set up new studios, laboratories, and theatres. Hence, by 1925, Bombay was already the undiscussed capital of India’s cinema, to the extent that its film industry soon bypassed the textile

¹⁷ At the time, films usually ran for less than a week.

manufacturing. Unfortunately, of the several hundred Indian films that were produced during Phalke's era, very few survived (Ganti, 2004: 10; Desai and Dudrah, 2008: 6).

2.2.4 The sound era

On 14 March 1931, the release of the Hindi "all-talking, all-singing, all-dancing film" *Alam Ara* ("Beauty of the World") by Ardeshir Irani at the Majestic Theatre in Bombay brought sound in Indian cinema for the first time. Other filmmakers immediately emulated this success by filling their movies with songs and dances: songs reached the number of 70 in *Indrasabha* ("Indra's Court"), a film of 1932. In this way, music entertainment started to be a distinctive feature of Indian cinema. Within a decade since the beginning of the sound era, the film industries in Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Lahore, and Pune, grew at a rapid rate, and the percentage of foreign films being screened in India dropped to less than 10 percent. Sound, nevertheless, also brought additional complications, especially in language (Ganti 2004: 11).

Since in India a multitude of languages were spoken and Bombay itself was a multilingual city, Bombay's filmmakers started wondering about the most suitable language for their productions. Initially, Hindi seemed to offer the largest market, even though also Hindi varied according to region. Directors finally decided for Hindustani, a variety of spoken Hindi which presented traits of both Hindi and Urdu. Hindustani was a language associated with bazaars and trade, and it served as a lingua franca across northern and central India. The filmmakers' choice, however, resulted in a singular, unusual situation: "Bombay became the only city where the language of the film industry was not congruent with the language of the region" (being that Gujarati and Marathi) (Ganti, 2004: 12).

With the advent of sound, another consequence was that filmmakers started needing actors and actresses who could both speak the specific chosen language of their performances and sing. This went to the detriment of those Anglo-Indian women and wrestlers who had worked in silent-era cinema, when native women were not willing to act due to the shame attached to public performances, which were considered prostitute- and courtesan-like. Acting, singing and dancing for an audience were thus relegated outside the boundaries of decent society. This was generally associated with limiting the movements of women outside their houses: within Hindu and Muslim Indian communities in fact, women had to represent the family's status and the community's respectability without violating any established norms of female modesty. Even

prostitutes did not wish to perform, because their acting would have disclosed their occupation. For all these reasons, in Phalke's *Raja Harischandra*, for example, the role of Queen Taramati was played by a young man. As a consequence, when, in the 1920s, women began to act in films, they were mainly Anglo-Indians, that is, women of a mixed British (or European) and Indian parentage, usually Christian or Jewish. Belonging to other ethnicities, these women were already separate from the traditional Indian society, hence they were less bound to its conventional codes of respectability (Ganti, 2004: 12-13).

In the sound era, places where talents could be found and hired to act in movies were theatres and the courtesan world, which, in India, included men and women of high culture particularly skilled in dancing and music; they were under the patronage of kings or nobility, for whom they used to perform classical music and dance. Female courtesans, in particular, were esteemed to be so cultured and refined that they frequently helped noblemen's sons train in etiquette, manners, in the art of conversation, and in the study and appreciation of literature, poetry and the arts in general. If patron and courtesan enjoyed a monogamous relationship, their male children were raised to become accompanying musicians, while girls had to carry on their mother's profession. Although the British colonialists contributed to the decline of the courtesan culture by reducing its influence with all possible means, and though the end of the monarchy caused a serious loss of wealth and of sources of patronage, courtesans still exist today as fascinating, dramatic characters in Hindi cinema (Ganti, 2004: 12-15).

A solution to the problem of singing performances was the introduction of "playback singing" in 1935. Thanks to this technique, actors and actresses were no longer required to be able to sing. Songs, moreover, could be released before the screening, so as to publicise the film itself. As soon as playback singing became an accepted practice, it gave rise to another distinctive institution of Indian cinema: the autonomous playback singer. By the late 1940s, it was only a handful of singers that rendered the songs for the whole cast on screen, whilst the on-screen stars merely had to mouth the lyrics (Ganti 2004: 15). Today too, songs are usually sung by playback singers. Singing performances have really become highly valuable commodities and, together with dance sequences, they often determine the success of a film. Furthermore, their presence in essentially distinct forms of media, including radio, video, and television, underpins the development and globalisation of cultural technologies in South Asia (Desai and Dudrah, 2008: 11).

2.2.5 The studio era

In the 1920s and 1930s, Indian film production was organised in the same way as at Hollywood, where studios bore the entire cost of a film's production and had technicians and actors as full-time employees. However, unlike at Hollywood, some Indian studios did not manage to monopolise the film business and the majority of them did not control either distribution or exhibition, which led to frequent commercial failures and even bankruptcy. In this brief "studio era" period, four important Indian studios, each usually specialised in a specific genre, were: Imperial Films Company in Bombay, Prabhat Film Company in Pune, New Theatres in Calcutta, and Bombay Talkies in Bombay. Imperial Films Company (1926-1938), which made films in at least nine languages, is known for its efforts at technological innovation, while the other three are remembered for having trained some of the eminent directors and actors of the 1950s and 1960s. The Imperial is also renowned for having shot the first night-scenes in 1929 by using incandescent lamps, and for having produced the first indigenously processed colour film in 1937, *Kisan Kanya* ("Farmer's Daughter"). Prabhat Film Company (1929-1953), instead, pioneered a new successful genre called "saint film," a phrase which defines biographical films about popular poet-saints from the 16th and 17th centuries (Ganti, 2004: 15-16).

New Theatres (1931-1955), the most elite of Bengali studios, was purposely founded as a sound studio and never produced silent movies. It employed more than one single director and many of its films were based on Bengali novels. One of its most famous productions was the iconic *Devdas* (1935), a movie shot in both Bengali and Hindi. *Devdas*, based on a novel written in 1917 by the great Bengali writer Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, was first made as a silent movie in 1928. Its first talkie version, adapted and directed by Barua (one of the most remarkable filmmakers in the history of Indian cinema), was so successful that it is said to have "revolutionised the entire outlook of Indian social pictures" (M. and N.K.G. Bhanja, 'From Jamai Sashti to Pather Panchali'). Over the following decades, it continued to be remade in several Indian languages: all remakes were box-office successes. Its 2002 lucky version, for example, is one of the most expensive Bollywood movies ever produced; according to *Box Office India*, it is also the highest-grossing Bollywood film of 2002 worldwide (Bose, 2006: 89-90).

Bombay Talkies (1934-1954), from which some of the major stars and directors of post-independence Hindi cinema came, was one of the largest pre-World War II

sound studios in India. Its early films (directed by Franz Osten between 1936 and 1939) were principally rurally-based dramas which dealt with social reformist themes that centred on the prejudices and exploitation that affected village communities. In 1943-44, some of the most successful members of Bombay Talkies broke away to form their own studio, Filmistan (Ganti 2004: 17-18).

2.2.6 The impact of World War II and Partition on Indian cinema

When Britain declared war on Germany in 1939, India, as a British colony, was unwillingly dragged into the conflict. Films that appeared to support the Indian independent movement (either through words or images) were censored by the colonial government, while priority was given to films that supported the war effort, thus provoking an overabundance of war movies. Government imposed state control over raw stock distribution until 1945, which led to a proliferous black market, so much so that war profiteers laundered their illegal earnings by investing in film production. Meanwhile, budgets and stars' salaries skyrocketed, to the point of making studios go out of business. Hence, studios went in slow decline, whilst independent producers, one of the main characteristics of today's Bombay film industry, rose (Ganti 2004: 19-20).

The military victory of the Allies bolstered the calls for Indian independence: the nationalist leaders started laying emphasis on the hypocrisy of the British, who had declared war on Germany and Japan by using the rhetoric of saving the world from tyranny, but, at the same time, had maintained their worldwide colonies. India eventually became independent on 15 August 1947; along with independence, a division, commonly referred to as "Partition," was made between the modern nation-states of India and Pakistan. India's Muslims were in the minority, representing about 25 percent of the population, so there was the need of finding them a homeland where they would not be marginalised. A momentous decision was taken: those areas of India in which there was a Muslim majority would become Pakistan; the others would remain India. This meant that Pakistan would consist of two wings, East and West, separated by over 1,400 kilometres of Indian territory. The establishment of such boundaries resulted in the largest migration of people in the 20th century: in a period as short as two months, an estimated 10-15 million Indians switched sides (Ganti, 2004: 19-21).

A serious problem was posed by those regions where there was not a major religious community: in Punjab, for example, many districts were interspersed with Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. Nearly one million people died in the ensuing insurgencies

and disorders between these three religious groups; violence was particularly brutal in the states of Punjab and Bengal, which were consequently divided (Ganti, 2004: 20-22).

These political events had an immediate impact on filmmaking, especially on the Bengali film industry located in Calcutta and on the Punjabi film industry located in Lahore, which lost both personnel and audience. Furthermore, the Bengali film industry was severely affected by 40 percent of its market becoming East Pakistan, and thus foreign territory. Following the Partition, Pakistan also imposed taxes on imported Indian films: in 1952, it banned their import in its western half; ten years later, the import of Indian films was prohibited also to the eastern wing. As an additional consequence, many contemporary prominent actors, producers, directors, and technicians, either migrated to Bombay from Pakistan or are descendants of those who did (Ganti, 2004: 22).

After both independence and Partition, the Bombay film industry remained one of the few Indian sites where Urdu, which became the official language of Pakistan, was kept alive. Despite the fact that Urdu literature and scholarship were officially neglected in favour of a Sanskritised Hindi, Hindi films continued to be made in Hindustani, and many outstanding Urdu poets kept working as lyricists within Bombay-based film industry. Film songs and dialogues still focused on the vocabulary, metaphors, and idioms derived from Urdu language and literature, such as *pyar*, *ishq*, or *mohabbat* for “love” and *khoon* for “blood.” Furthermore, Muslims were not marginalised in the Bombay film industry, where they actually enjoyed prominence and success, both as actors and actresses, and as directors, screenwriters, choreographers, lyricists, and composers (Ganti, 2004: 23).

2.2.7 Post-independence Indian cinema

Post-independence filmmaking can be categorised into three main eras corresponding to three key moments that have forged the Indian social and political context and generated various emblematic narratives, protagonists and antagonists (Ganti, 2004: 23-24).

The first era was shaped by post-independence tasks of nation-building and economic development, and was heavily influenced by India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s social and political approaches to identify and solve the central issues faced by the new country. The second era took place in the early 1970s, when a generalised socio-political unrest and a growing discontent with the government

culminated in a state of emergency enforced by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975. The films that were shot at this stage differed from those of the previous era in the representation of the state, of the male protagonist (usually referred to as a hero), and of villainy. Lastly, the third era was influenced by the large-scale process of economic liberalisation begun in 1991 and by the so-called “satellite invasion.” Whilst, in the first two eras, films had an uncontested hegemony because of the lack of, or marginal, presence of television, since 1991 filmmaking has had to confront the presence of this new media as well (Ganti, 2004: 24).

2.2.7.1 The first era, or the “Golden Age” (1950s)

Despite the initial rejoicing of the Hindi film industry at the end of the British rule, filmmakers were soon afflicted by the treatment they were suffering from the new government. In fact, in the hierarchy of needs constructed by the newly independent nation-state, filmmaking was not understood to be economically essential. At the time of independence, only 18 percent of the population was literate, the average life expectancy was of 26 years, over a million refugees needed to be resettled, and the nation was being hit by a mounting food crisis. Therefore, the national economic policy established other priorities, like rapid industrialisation, infrastructural development, and food self-sufficiency. Following an official suspension on “non-essential building,” even theatre construction was banned by most states - given the current size of annual theatre attendance, which amounts to about five billion, India has still today an extremely low number of movie screens (12,900, according to data of the early 2000s) (recorded in Ganti, 2004: 25). Already-existing colonial regulatory policies, including censorship, became much stricter after independence, and entertainment taxes and import duties were levied. In terms of censorship, disapproval was expressed about most films, sequence-cuts were ordered indiscriminately, and both Indian and foreign films were rejected in a way that seemed totally arbitrary (Ganti, 2004: 25-26).

After the various associations of filmmakers patiently explained their reasons through editorials, letters, and delegations, on 30 June 1949, the Indian Motion Picture Association (IMPPA), the Bengal Motion Picture Association (BMPA), and the South Indian Film Chamber of Commerce (SIFCC) joined in an All-India Cinema Protest Day. During this day, all the movie theatres throughout the country were closed as a sign of protest. Unfortunately, this demonstration did not lead to any concrete changes in the government policies; the only tangible result was the appointing of a Film

Enquiry Committee comprising both filmmakers and government officials, whose 1951 report's sensible recommendations, however, were endorsed merely a decade later (Ganti, 2004: 26-27; Bose, 2006: 164-165).

Spurred by independence, a heated debate over the constitution of an “authentic Indian” culture was sparked off. Since films represented hybrid forms that typified the “bastardization” of the classical arts, they became objects of trenchant criticism on the part of political leaders, bureaucrats, journalists, intellectuals, and “concerned citizens.” The state aimed to educate Indians about the “purer” traditions of their music, so much so that from July 1952 onwards All India Radio (AIR), the government-sponsored radio network, reduced its broadcasting time for film songs, which were overly influenced by Western music. Moreover, the Minister of Information and Broadcasting put an end to the practice of announcing the song's film title, and instead let broadcasting give only the singer's name. Film producers responded by revoking the performing licenses for AIR, thus making film songs suddenly disappear from radio. This proved unprofitable for AIR, especially after Radio Ceylon began broadcasting Indian films' songs on its new commercial short-wave service. Licenses for AIR were renewed in 1957 (Ganti, 2004: 26-27; Bose, 2006: 164-165).

As Ganti claimed, “[t]hough cinema in this period occupied an ambivalent cultural status and was frequently perceived by the state and middle-class society as frivolous and corrupting, from the point of view of the current Bombay film industry, the Indian media, and audiences, this era is exalted as the “Golden Age” of Hindi cinema.” “[C]reativity, originality, quality, genius, sincerity, and professionalism” characterised the age (2004: 28).

In the 1950s Hindi cinema was influenced by many different happenings, including the presence of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the First International Film Festival of India, which, held in Bombay in 1952, exposed Hindi filmmakers to a world of cinema not limited to Hollywood, and a series of socio-economical phenomena, such as nation-building, a large-scale rural-to-urban-migration, and several reforms. IPTA was informally affiliated to the Communist Party of India, so its members (writers, musicians, composers, lyricists, actors, directors) tended to depict the lives, the pains, and the struggles of the oppressed in their productions (Ganti, 2004: 28). At the International Film Festival, instead, a tremendous impact was exerted by Italian neorealist movies, especially those by Vittorio de Sica (Willemen and Rajadhyaksha, 1998: 23).

After independence, the pouring of many migrants from rural areas to cities in search of jobs augmented the levels of exploitation, crime, and danger of Indian urban areas. Nonetheless, though being a sort of “crime thrillers,” the films from this period that were set in cities conveyed a sense of idealism and of anticipation for a better tomorrow. The typical heroes were peasants, members of the urban working class, and middle-class professionals, while the antagonists were represented by moneylenders, rural landlords called *zamindars*, and wealthy businessmen; the state was a representative of benevolence, an arbiter of justice, and an agent of progress. In films focused on family dynamics or on relationships, instead, generation gaps and traditional attitudes provided a source of conflict. The first era of Indian filmmaking also saw the upsurge of patriotic movies: in the wake of independence, these films tended to emphasise the unity of the Indian nation in spite of its wide religious, linguistic, and ethnic diversity. The stress on forging a pan-Indian identity has since continued, while the optimism for a better life in newly-independent India started to wane by the early 1970s (Ganti, 2004: 29-30).

2.2.7.2 The second era, or the “decade of the angry man” (1970s)

Indians’ hope for a better future life was undermined by serious economic difficulties that provoked food shortages and rampant inflation. Such hardships, in turn, were caused by the cost of war with Pakistan in 1971 (resulting in East Pakistan becoming Bangladesh), by the expenses for assistance to refugees, and by the severe droughts and the world energy crisis that hit India in 1972 and 1973. Wide-scale protests sparked in the streets causing political unrest; violence was perpetrated by the police, who tried to stop crowds by firing at or beating them. In 1971, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, exploiting India’s success in the Pakistani war, announced new elections, which she won with an overwhelming majority even without having a clear economic program. In the summer of 1975, however, she was accused of “corrupted practices” during her election campaign and asked to resign; on 26 June 1975 a state of Internal Emergency was declared. As a consequence, the civil liberties guaranteed by the Indian Constitution were suspended and over 100,000 people were arrested without apparent reason and detained without trial, sometimes succumbing to torture and even murder. Newspapers were barred from publishing their names and often no one, not even those who were arrested were made to know the charges against them. Furthermore, in 1976, Sanjay Gandhi, Indira’s son, announced a new National Population Policy aiming at the

sterilisation of 23 million people over three years, mostly among the poorest. In Delhi, 700,000 people were made homeless, and displaced by a “beautification” programme (planned by Sanjay again) involving the clearing of slums and the demolishing of run-down neighbourhoods (Willemen and Rajadhyaksha, 1998: 26-27; Ganti, 2004: 30-31).

In this socio-political climate, Indira cast herself as India’s saviour and, despite the strong dissent towards her figure, she announced her 20-Point Economic Programme and called for new national elections in March 1977. She promised:

the implementation of agricultural land ceilings, houses for landless labourers, the abolition of bonded labour, the liquidation of rural debt, cheaper prices, higher agricultural wages, increased production and employment, the socialisation of urban land, a crackdown on tax evasion, the confiscation of smuggled property and cheaper textbooks. (Willemen and Rajadhyaksha, 1998: 26)

Both Gandhi and the Congress Party suffered a devastating defeat and a new government was formed. Filmmaking bore the brunt of this situation, showing a great deal of uncertainty and insecurity. In 1973, a major raw stock shortage affected the film industry, which was also concerned about rumours of the government’s nationalisation of film distribution as it had occurred to banks and other key industries. Fortunately, this never took place. The persona of the hero in Hindi cinema was completely changed by *Zanjeer* (“The Chain”), a tremendously successful 1973 film about a police officer who works outside the bounds of the law to avenge himself on the killer of his parents. By playing this character, Bollywood star Amitabh Bachchan introduced the figure of the “angry young man”; subsequently, the short-hand title “decade of the angry man” was attributed to all the movies of the 1970s. In effect, Bachchan’s skills seemed to sum up the mood of rage affecting the entire nation (Ganti, 2004: 32; Bose, 2006: 267-268).

To a certain extent, the films of the second era increased in violence and shifted their attention from the domestic domain to the state, which was frequently portrayed as inefficient in dealing with crimes, unemployment, and poverty. Villains were mostly smugglers and black marketers who pretended to be wealthy and respectable businessmen. Corrupt politicians too were added in the films of the 1980s, while the police became the sole, legitimate representative of the state. Another prominent narrative genre was the “lost and found,” begun in the 1960s and continued well into the 1980s. This genre focused on a nuclear family or on siblings being separated in childhood (usually with the complicity of a villain), and then reunited after they have

become adults and those responsible for their initial traumatic separation have been defeated. In such a popular genre, the separation of the family can be associated with some traumas caused by, or linked to, the Partition, during which many families were separated and some never reunited (Ganti 2004: 33).

2.2.7.3 The third era: liberalisation and the “satellite invasion” (1990s - today)

The cinematic representation of families and their moral dilemmas changed significantly in the 1990s. In those years, two processes that shaped the context for contemporary filmmaking were economic liberalisation, begun by the Indian government in 1991, and one of its consequences, satellite television, first appeared in 1992. On the one hand, economic liberalisation was a policy of economic reform which consisted in a relaxation of restrictions and state controls over the economic field. This policy, principally aimed at foreign investment, was encouraged by a rising foreign debt and other economic dysfunctions. On the other hand, the reduction of red tape and the provision of more incentives for multinationals to set up in the subcontinent favoured the introduction of satellite television. In the Indian subcontinent, television, which made its first appearance in September 1959 with a pilot UNESCO-sponsored educational project, had had a significant social role only since the mid-1980s (Willemsen and Rajadhyaksha, 1998: 29; Ganti, 2004: 33-35).

Cable networks, begun unofficially in 1984 for tourist hotels, by 1991 became equipped with satellite dishes and had access to STAR TV, BBC, CNN and ZEE TV, India's first successful private Hindi language channel: the availability of a range of 10 to 50 channels depended on the cable operator. While, at the beginning, Hindi filmmakers perceived the introduction of these new satellite channels as a threat for their industry, soon television was regarded as an effective means to publicise and promote their film market. The broadcasting of film music, film industry news, celebrity gossip, film awards or stage shows featuring film stars, reinforced the dominance of Hindi cinema, so much so that many TV channels have become largely dependent on Hindi films. Audiences, however, could no longer be taken for granted, because television was also a rival outlet for films, no less than a source for other forms of home-entertainment like prime-time game shows and soap operas. Another considerable problem was represented by uncontrolled and unpunished cable piracy, which caused the release of films either at the same time or even before their opening in theatres. The pressures on film industry thus differed from the past: the affordability of tickets, the

usual, urban traffic congestions, and the poor conditions of cinemas in smaller or marginal areas were additional drawbacks. In order to make the audiences' cinematic experience pleasant and unique then, in the 1990s filmmakers have started spending a great deal of money and energies in productions, for example by improving values such as digital sound, foreign locations, extravagant song sequences, and lavish sets. Much greater attention has also been paid to marketing, both before and after the official release of films; the advent of the Internet in 1997 has highly facilitated such kind of promotion. A growing internationalisation of film production and distribution has finally followed the liberalisation of the Indian economy, so much so that nowadays filmmakers are increasingly shooting a substantial part of their movies in Africa, Australia, Europe, and North America, reaping revenues from international circulation. Distribution offices have proliferated in the US East Coast and in London; dubbing or subtitling have further widened the markets (Ganti, 2004: 34-38).

Following their entrance in the Western media landscape, certain Hindi movies now enjoy a greater commercial success in the UK and the USA than in India: the overseas market has been one of the most profitable sources of income for Bombay filmmakers since the 1990s. In terms of themes, visual style, music, and marketing, some phenomenal box-office successes of 1994-95 (like *Hum Aapke Hain Koun!* - "What Do I Mean to You!" and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* - "The One with a True Heart Will Win the Bride") have consolidated the trend of the "family entertainers," a cinematic genre encompassing love stories filled with songs, dances, and weddings, against the backdrop of extremely wealthy, extended, and also transnational families. A discourse about these kinds of movies may be inserted in the 1990s' debate about the target audiences of Bombay industry: the dominance of the "family entertainers" genre has led the Indian media and also some members of the Indian film industry itself to accuse directors of creating films aimed exclusively at the South-Asian diasporic communities living abroad (Ganti, 2004: 38-40).

In opposition to films of the previous era, all signs of poverty and economic hardship have been eliminated from movies of the post-satellite era; the protagonists are no longer members of the working or lower middle classes (if present, they are sources of tension), but they are usually incredibly rich, being frequently the sons and daughters of millionaires. These new films tend to lack a villain-figure, so that even the state and its representatives are absent. Affluent businessmen, from being symbols of exploitation, injustice and criminality in Hindi movies from the 1950s to 1980s, since

the mid-1990s have been loving and indulgent fathers. Class distinctions and class conflicts have been removed as well, so they are no longer reasons of parental disapproval to youth's love stories. On the contrary, contrasts are now based on the tension between individual desire and duty to one's family: there can be a love triangle or strict parents can be against their child's choice of partner. Nevertheless, while in earlier love stories, young lovers used to elope, since the mid-1990s obedient children have tended to sacrifice their love for the sake of their respective family's honour. A conservative outlook is thus placed side by side to a "cosmopolitan and MTV-inspired visual style" (Ganti, 2004: 40-41).

Since the late 1990s, two other thematic trends have continued some cinematic traditions started in the previous eras. The first is the depiction of the world of gangsters and organised crime: from being Westernised and glamorised, the representations of mafia bosses and their gangs have changed into being more ethnically and regionally concerned. Bombay's milieu, with its slang and street dialect, has become one of the designed sets. Moreover, while in older films characters used to become criminals for reasons of basic economic survival, in recent movies organised crime represents a pragmatic choice of employment for poor and working-class men who aspire to adapt to the new consumerist post-liberalisation Indian lifestyle. However, no moral justification to their decision is explicitly provided by specific movie scenes (Ganti, 2004: 41).

The second trend is the upsurge of nationalism, which, though present in Hindi films since Indian independence, has recently animated contrasts between insiders and outsiders, between citizens and foreigners: India is now represented as having a moral, cultural, and spiritual superiority. Whilst villains used to be either Europeans or Westernised Indians, the villainous figure of recent, nationalist Hindi films is the terrorist; the saviours of the state are the military, the paramilitary, or policemen. Films about terrorism actually began in the late 1980s, then increased following the intensification of separatist insurgencies which made bomb blasts, religious riots, kidnappings, and hijackings look fairly normal in contemporary India. *Border*, a film directed in 1997 by J. P. Dutta concerning a precise battle during the Indo-Pak war of 1971, has led to name Pakistan as an explicit enemy of India and as the instigator of its troubles. Previously, Pakistan was referred to obliquely as "over there" or "the enemy." In these patriotic and nationalist films, the alleged moral and cultural superiority of India is not glorified through representations of the West (as evil or threatening) and of its materialist culture. Since the mid-1990s, Hindi films have rather depicted Indians

living abroad as more culturally authentic than their counterparts in the homeland. Indians living abroad are no longer exploited for comic relief, but are frequently Indian diasporic protagonists living in Australia, Canada, England or the USA, all countries that have become the main cinematic settings (Ganti, 2004: 41-43).

Among the genres of recent and contemporary Bollywood cinema, some are classified as *Masalas*, a Hindi word indicating a mixture of spices. Aiming at the broadest range of audiences, their key characteristic is the inclusion of song and dance sequences; those viewers who are most invested in social realism, however, find it difficult to ascribe these movies as constructions of the “real.” In addition to this, even though not all Hindi films are *Masalas*, such a term is often used as the most common Western stereotype to refer comprehensively to all Hindi cinema and to state that Bollywood lacks a proper distinction of genres. In reality, *Masala* films, which are usually popular within the urban working class, may be considered portrayals of every man and woman in today’s fast-changing world (Ganti, 2004: 139). Desai and Dudrah highlight that in *Masalas* “one can see big city underworld crime, martial arts, fight scenes with exaggerated hitting noises – ‘dishum, dishum,’ car stunts, sexy cabaret, elaborate dance sequences with dozens of extras, comedy, romance and family melodrama. [In short,] everything is designed to give maximum impact” (2008: 12).

In May 1998, Indian filmmaking was finally granted the status of “industry,” which led to a series of symbolic and concrete benefits like reduced rates for electricity and the eligibility of production companies for bank and institutional finance. The first reason for this change of attitude on the part of the Government of India had to do with its attempt to rescue Bombay film industry from organised crime and black money. Another important factor was the intersection of neo-liberal economic rhetoric and the rise of cultural nationalist politics; this politics was represented by the Hindu nationalist and pro-business Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), whose support base was made mainly of petty traders and small businessmen, categories that also constituted the vast apparatus for Hindi filmmaking. Lastly, the Indian state’s image of itself as the “hegemon” in South Asia has been reinforced by the fact that Hindi cinema and its related pop culture are now extremely popular also in other parts of the subcontinent, such as in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Film imports from India are banned in these countries; however, a thriving piracy is present and Pakistani newspapers are full of articles regarding the influence of Hindi movies and Hindi television. Nowadays, the Bombay film industry is the other dominant global film industry together with Hollywood, with which it shares

the same box-office income in rich countries like Japan, the UK and the USA. The industry has become such a source of distinction that some Western governments, including the Italian one, are trying to persuade Hindi directors to shoot in their countries. In the contemporary age of globalisation, Bollywood has thus proved to be a source of national pride and a symbol of Indianness (Ganti, 2004: 50-52).

Chapter 3

Maqbool (2003)

3.1 The context

Macbeth is Shakespeare's shortest and fastest-moving tragedy. It is alleged to have been written during 1606 and to have first been performed fairly late in that year at the Globe Theatre in London. Despite its brevity, it appears to have the most pronounced atmosphere of evil of any of the playwright's works, so much so that two-thirds of the tragedy is set in darkness. In addition, according to Jorgensen, "no other tragedy has so many strange, disturbing phenomena" (cited in Clark and Mason, 2015: 2): in the theatrical world, it has even acquired a certain aura of superstition, fuelling the belief that the play is cursed. In order to stage the rise and fall of the Scottish general Macbeth, Shakespeare drew on various sources, using Holinshed's *Chronicles* as his "prior text," presumably in its edition of 1587. Holinshed's account was followed in sequence and with great fidelity, from the rebellions against King Duncan, quelled by Banquo and Macbeth, to the Sisters' prophecies and the subsequent escalation of Macbeth's ambition, inflamed by his wife and leading to the committing of brutal murders and the establishing of a tyranny. The last sections of the *Chronicles* Shakespeare made use of deal with Macduff's killing of the tyrant and Malcom's creation of Scotland's first earls (Clark and Mason, 2015: 1-2; 82-85).

In India, where *Macbeth* is the most popular Shakespearean tragedy after *Othello* and has thus been performed in different modes since the introduction of the playwright into the country (Trivedi, 2005: 48), the so-called "Scottish play" was successfully adapted for cinema by the Indian director and music composer Vishal Bhardwaj in 2003 and given the title of *Maqbool*. In *Maqbool*, Bhardwaj relocated the Shakespearean setting from 11th-century Scotland to the 21st-century Muslim environment of Mumbai's underworld. The director described his production as "a loose adaptation," not meant for Shakespeare scholars, as he tried to be faithful to the play's spirit rather than to its original text (Trivedi, 2007: 153). Furthermore, by Bhardwaj's own admission, originally he had no plans to take up Shakespeare, so much so that *Maqbool* "happened by accident." Before directing the movie, he had not read the tragedy, he only knew that he wanted to make a film on the underworld, for which reason he was looking for a "great story." He decided precisely for *Macbeth* after he

read Charles and Mary Lamb's abridged version of the play in their *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), finding it suitable to be turned into a gangster movie. This first adaptation has then brought about a successful Indianised Shakespearean trilogy, though Bhardwaj confessed that at school he was scared of the playwright's plays ("Who is not scared of Shakespeare in school?" he ironically asked during an interview). The things he has been attracted to the most in the playwright's canon, and which have influenced his filmmaking, are Shakespeare's dramatic writing and characterisation, in particular the way the playwright used to deal with the psyche of human beings, which is "why his writing is relevant even after 450 years" (Singh, 2015).

As in the Parsi theatre adaptations of Shakespearean works, also in *Maqbool* the main plot and characters are retained, even though they are given different names and are connected by different family ties: Macbeth is Miyan Maqbool (a gangster), Lady Macbeth is called Nimmi and is Jahangir Khan's (alias the ganglord Abbaji/Duncan) mistress and Maqbool's lover; Banquo is named Kaka, while his son Guddu represents both Fleance and Malcolm; Macduff is Boti, and, most significantly, the Sisters are played by Purohit and Pandit, two corrupt astrologically-minded policemen. An additional character, or better an extra, is Nimmi and Maqbool's newborn son, whose paternity is nonetheless uncertain, as his biological father could also be Abbaji. Differently from the play, in the movie not only is Lady Macbeth's pregnancy put to the foreground but the baby survives and is finally taken care of by Guddu and Sameera, who is Guddu's intended bride and Abbaji's only child. Blair Orfall acknowledges that Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), in which Asaji, the Japanese Lady Macbeth, is pregnant, exerted considerable influence over Bhardwaj's production. Furthermore, pregnancy is explored in the Indian adaptation of *Macbeth* entitled *Maranayakana Drishtanta* (1991) by H. S. Shiva Prakash, possibly known by Bhardwaj (García-Periago, 2014: 64-66).

In terms of Bollywood conventions, the film simultaneously deconstructs and broadens them, especially as far as diegetic songs, dances, marriage spectacles, and emotional strategies are concerned. Bollywood industry itself, and the corruption circulating in it, are involved in the movie. In the introduction to their *Global Bollywood*, Gopal and Moorti claim that "[t]o talk of Bollywood is inevitably to talk of the song and dance sequence," which is often inserted arbitrarily so much so that, for decades, some music interludes have been shot in distant, exotic locations (cited in García-Periago, 2014: 67). In *Maqbool*, instead, Bhardwaj used song and dance

sequences to the minimal, he did not set them in foreign, bucolic landscapes (as Switzerland or Goa may be), but he well integrated them into the storyline. Specifically, he employed three songs as three festive interludes that were not inserted as mere fillers but responded appropriately to the needs of the film's narrative (García-Periago, 2014: 68).

The first interlude is represented by the song *Ru-ba-ru* ("We are face to face"), which is performed by thirteen *qawwals*¹⁸, all dressed in white, at a *dargah*¹⁹ during a Sufi funeral. Apparently, the music is non-diegetic, played in the background while Nimmi and Maqbool are walking to the tomb after she has refused to be driven to the temple in Abbaji's car. During the song, images of the couple, starting with Maqbool's reaction to Nimmi's love declaration, are alternated with images of the don and his entourage. Despite the audience's initial impressions, when Nimmi and Maqbool finally reach the shrine the song is proved to be diegetic, which means that it is heard by all characters and not only by viewers. Such a song is used to both reveal the lustful relationship developing between Nimmi and Maqbool, showing specifically her provocative behaviour towards the gangster (with all the risks that it entails), and the infatuation between Abbaji's daughter Sameera and Kaka's son Guddu. Doubts concerning their alleged liaison arise in Maqbool's mind, when, at the beginning of their walking, Nimmi shrewdly tells him that he will never be able to replace Abbaji because he is a "wimp" that does not have the "guts" to even touch her; if Jahangir has no son, Guddu is the rightful heir, since, in this case, it is the son-in-law that becomes the next in line. Maqbool interprets the woman's words as deliberate lies; the images associated with the song, however, testify to Nimmi's truthfulness. Hence, from a religious lyric the song is turned into a secular hymn visually rendered by continuous exchanges of glances between the characters (0:24:50 – 0:30:02)²⁰.



Figure 1

¹⁸ Male singers of *qawwali*, a style of Muslim devotional music.

¹⁹ The tomb of a Muslim saint or a Muslim shrine.

²⁰ Throughout this dissertation, all the references to specific scenes in Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* refer to the version of the film available at: <<https://eintusan.tv/movie/results/?lang=hindi&query=maqbool>>

The second interlude is characterised by the song *Rone Do* (“Let me cry”), which sets the scene for the reinforcement of the sentimental relationship between Nimmi and Maqbool after, at gunpoint, the woman has forced him to declare his love for her. Erotic cinematic images and devices (the couple reflected in the mirror, the two looking at her photo album, Maqbool going out at night to search for her missing earring, and other similar tender gestures) are used as symbols and culminate in a white net that surrounds the bed and through which their all-consuming passion is aroused. The final shot makes the sexual consummation of their love explicit (0:54:44 – 0:58:06).



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

The third interlude is performed at Guddu and Sameera’s engagement ceremony, during which a large group of women sing *Jhin min jhini* (a festive song that talks of harmony and peace) and improvise choreography on its melody. Towards the end of the music, Maqbool himself is got involved in the dance. Such a “naïve” scene intermingles with another one in which a Bollywood actress, who then becomes Abbaji’s new mistress, performs sensually in front of an all-male audience. By symbolising the don’s unfaithfulness to his previous concubine, she plays the role of the vamp, a typical figure in Indian popular movies. Also Nimmi is portrayed as a prostitute, but her deep love for Maqbool elevates her to more than a plain carnal figure. In such marriage-spectacle interlude, wedding rituals, like *mehndi*²¹ and *sangeet*²², are not given the same scrupulous attention that is usually paid to them in Indian movies according to the traditional spirit of Bollywood cinema (1:02:52 – 1:09:00). Most significantly, the ceremonial appears to end in “a complete fiasco,” as it is brutally interrupted by the assassination of Abbaji (the bride’s father) the night before the wedding (García-Periago, 2014: 68-70).

²¹ A practice that consists in applying temporary henna tattoos, especially during bride and groom’s preparations for wedding.

²² Literally meaning “singing together, music, concert,” this is the celebration that is usually held before a Hindu wedding ceremony and that is dedicated to the bride-to-be and her female friends and relatives.



Figure 5

In the context of Mumbai's underworld, the fringes of the city compromised by speculation and circulation of black money, also Bollywood is a current terrain for the mafia. For example, in 2000, Nazim Hassan Rizvi, the producer of blockbuster *Chori Chori Chupke Chupke* (2001), was arrested for alleged criminal implications. Indian mafia is usually embroiled even when producers want to shoot some scenes with high-demanded film stars and want to have the priority over their already-scheduled agendas. In *Maqbool*, blackmailed actors are personified by the actress who is threatened to perform for Abbaji and who then becomes his new heartthrob. Another explicit reference to corruption in the film industry is made by Kaka when he offers Nimmi to work in a movie by one of the best Bollywood directors, making her choose among Karan Johar, Subhash Ghai, Ram Gopal Varma, and Mani Ratnam. Ratnam's *Nayakan* (1987) and Varma's *Satya* (1998) and *Company* (2002) are precisely some of the gangster movies to which *Maqbool* is indebted (García-Periago, 2014: 71-72). Apart from Varma's gangster films and the already-mentioned Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*, the production of *Maqbool* was apparently influenced by the works of Quentin Tarantino and by Luc Besson's *Léon* (1994), whose ending is followed shot by shot. Moreover, Bhardwaj seems to have referenced to Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), which is itself intertextually linked to Shakespeare (Sen, 2010: 231-232).

Bhardwaj's first Shakespearean production thus conforms more to gangster and action movies than to previous Shakespearean adaptations, like Chopra's *1942: A Love Story* (1994) and Ratnam's *Bombay* (1995), which used to link the Shakespearean play to the colonial discourse. Furthermore, it departs from Kapoor's *Bobby* (1977), Rawail's *Betaab* (1983), Khan's *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988), and Akhtar's *Dil Chahta Hai* (2002), all Shakespearean offshoots in which the playwright is generally refreshed or appears as a cultural icon, and from noticeably acclaimed projects like Abel's *In Othello* (2002) (García-Periago, 2014: 79-80). In *Maqbool*, Shakespeare is both embraced by the Indian culture and understood as transnational, so the film is part of the so-called

“McShakespeare,” a term that, toying with the idea of “McDonaldization,” hints at the commodification of the playwright due to today’s globalisation (García-Periago, 2014: 63). Interestingly enough, both *Maqbool* and *Omkaara*, Bhardwaj’s adaptation of *Othello* (2006), are two of the first Indian Shakespearean adaptations to have been screened at international film festivals and to have been objects of international critical attention. In effect, their Indianisation has not reduced the richness and complexity of the original tragedies (Sen, 2010: 226). The critical reception these films have been subjected to has been generally both favourable and enthusiastic: Poonam Trivedi and Douglas Lanier have found *Maqbool* rich in outstanding qualities, especially if compared with other cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays. Among these qualities, they have listed: the economy of narration, the father-son relationship between Maqbool and Abbaji, the recasting of the three Weird Sisters as a pair of corrupt officers, and the representation of the love between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as a forbidden romance (Tiwari, 2016: 168). Whilst *Macbeth* is a story of ambition leading to the misery of its ambitious protagonist and his wife, *Maqbool* is a love story stained by a “mess of lust, greed, jealousy, and suspicion” with a very unhappy ending (Chaudhury, 2016: 530; Jha and Banerjee, 2016: 307). Nevertheless, all taken into consideration, Bhardwaj succeeded in depicting Maqbool with the same contradictions that Anthony Davies perceives in Macbeth, that is, the fact of being a character “human in his reflections and inhumane in his actions” (cited in Mondal, 2017: 2).

Maqbool portrays Mumbai as a cosmopolitan and multicultural city in which violence is the dominant force. In Mumbai, Abbaji is the “Messiah of the minorities,” so that he refuses to both move to any host country (like Dubai or Karachi) in which he is not recognised as “don,” and to ship an unidentified cargo of contraband goods (possibly arms and explosives, then handled by Maqbool in an attempt to recover a leading position in the gangdom of Mumbai). His refusal is meaningful as it marks his distancing from some contemporary Indian terrorists, like Chhota Shakeel and Dawood Ibrahim, who had to run their business from abroad. In particular, Ibrahim had to flee India for Dubai, where he kept in touch with his henchmen by mobile phone and remained untouched until 9/11 terrorist attacks. Only when his connection with Al-Qaeda was discovered, did the USA declare him a global terrorist (García-Periago, 2014: 77). Abbaji is the head of a crime family and has younger protégés like Maqbool, which makes his death by murder even more loaded with significance: “Abbaji” is precisely a nickname for “father.” The film shows how, in the underbelly of the city,

murders are normalised, and power, ambition, and evil are ubiquitous. Furthermore, it suggests that the mafia dons of Mumbai, having influence over a wide range of social aspects, from politics to the film industry, are the real rulers of the state. For instance, whichever party Abbaji backs, it never loses the elections (Sen, 2010: 231).

Contrary to the play, which starts with a heroic representation of Macbeth, the atmosphere of the film is charged with a negative tone since the very beginning. While in the tragedy Banquo and Macbeth are said to have rectified the unrest stirred up in Scotland by some disloyal generals of King Duncan, in the movie unrest is sparked off by an honest police officer, ACP Devsare, who, after having taken out a warrant in the don's name in an attempt to undo the wrong, faces Abbaji and publicly slaps his favourite, Maqbool. However, after a brief period of detention for Abbaji, this policeman promptly receives a letter which decrees his transfer to another town. A correspondence between the two beginnings can further be explained in these terms: as the play starts with three hags that, in an atmosphere of thunder and lightning, decide to meet again before the set of sun and to encounter Macbeth upon a heath, the film starts close to midnight in similar weather conditions with two corrupt policemen that, in their rain-drenched van, interrogate a gangster and already predict Maqbool's rise. In *Macbeth*, Macbeth, the thane of Glamis, and Banquo, one of the generals, are said to have put down the revolts against Duncan's rule by defeating Macdonald and his troops; in *Maqbool*, viewers are shown that Maqbool, Kaka, and Guddu (corresponding with Macbeth, Banquo, and Fleance) defeat their rival gang by killing its ganglord, Mughal (Macdonald). There is not a rebellion against a king, rather Mughal's gang has murdered the brother of Jahangir Khan (Duncan), the "king" of Mughal's rival gang to which Maqbool belongs. According to Jha and Banerjee, the tones of the two beginnings are different because, in Shakespeare's tragedy Macbeth and Banquo are described as heroes, loyal to their benevolent sovereign (thus the tone is positive), whilst in Bhardwaj's movie Maqbool and Kaka are antiheroes, loyal to a "sovereign" who does not govern a peaceful reign but the underworld (thus the tone is negative) (2016: 307-308). In both cases, unrest is brought about by an alarming situation. However, while in *Macbeth* this entails a rebellion against the official rule, in *Maqbool* unrest is sparked off by "law" that tries to put an end to "lawlessness," which is the "official" rule of Mumbai. According to Chaudhuri, unlike Shakespeare Bhardwaj, since the beginning, "shows up the ineffectiveness of state law in a climate of all-pervasive corruption, moral decay, official apathy and political collusion with crime"

(2012: 105). Mumbai is thus a city in which lawlessness becomes the law, and such a subversion of law and order appears to be widely accepted. Law and lawlessness are balanced by corrupt inspectors, like Pandit and Purohit, who represent the stabilising forces that act without taking specific sides as the crisis develops (Jha and Banerjee, 2016: 307-308). Maqbool was born in this evil space, he is a “natural extension” of its murky underbelly, so much so that evil is neither an option nor a choice for him, but a “compulsory part of his life” (Mondal, 2017: 3).

Even though for a non-Hindi-speaking person it is not easy to analyse the linguistic aspects of a Hindi film without knowing the language, Bhardwaj seems to have focused on linguistic matters as much as on setting. He made the characters speak a broad spectrum of languages and slangs, from Hindi and Mumbaiya Hindi (that is Hindi colloquialisms spoken in Mumbai) to Urdu and *tapori* (the slang of criminal gangs), thus reflecting the cosmopolitanism of the city in which the film is set, where people of different ethnicities and religions live and work together (Tiwari, 2016: 171). This cosmopolitanism is also shown visually, most significantly by the engagement between Sameera (a Muslim girl) and Guddu (a Hindu young man). As demonstrated in the following subchapter, Mumbai is an “expanding, global, commercial, capitalistic city” in which Muslims and Hindus collaborate, to the point of cooperating with each other even in the underworld (Dutta, 2013: 40).

3.1.1 A displaced Muslim community in Mumbai

Bhardwaj’s choice of having the main characters in *Maqbool* come from an exiled Muslim community in Mumbai could be interpreted as a reference to the growing hostility towards this community after 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA, which damaged irreparably the image of Islam worldwide. Enmity was also reignited after 2002 Gujarat’s religious riots, which caused numerous deaths both among Hindus and Muslims; on that occasion, disorder was sparked off after a fire on a train killed a group of Hindu pilgrims who were coming home from Ayodhya, itself a site of religious disputes that in 1992 provoked bloody clashes between Hindus and Muslims. Islamic groups claimed responsibility for subsequent bomb attacks in the subcontinent as well. On 26 November 2008 (26/11 attacks), for instance, ten members of an Islamic terrorist organisation based in Pakistan landed by boat on the sea-coast of Mumbai and besieged the city for four days, storming into public buildings, shooting passengers in the railway station, killing guests and staff of the Taj Mahal and Trident hotels, and organising

coordinated bombing attacks. These Hindu-Muslim conflicts might be compared with the Catholic-Protestant rivalry that was rampant in Shakespearean England, even though it is not put forward in the tragedy (Mason, 2009: 1-2; Chaudhuri, 2012: 110).

Another parallel could be made between the perception of Scotland (setting of *Macbeth*) in Shakespearean times and the vision of Muslim India at the beginning of the 21st century: both convey a sense of otherness and “alienness” (Mondal, 2017: 2). Before 1603, when James VI of Scotland came to the throne of England thus becoming James I of England and uniting the two Crowns, the English (especially those coming from London and the south-east) had little contact with Scotland. In addition, this land was seen as “a poor, primitive, and far-away country which the civilized nations of Europe regarded with [both] contempt and romantic fascination” (Ridley, 1968: 1; 8). Likewise, though being the second largest religious group in India, Muslims have represented a marginalised minority since the Partition. Their seemingly exclusion from Indian society has further increased after the spread of Hindu right-wing organisations and ideologies in the 1980s: the decline of communal violence, which followed the riots in Gujarat in 2002, has not diminished the sense of alienation felt by religious minorities. In Bhardwaj’s Mumbai, a city where “the level of spatial segregation and insecurity among Muslims is predictably high” (Kirmani, 2016), this sense of “other” is rendered illegitimate by the fact that Shakespeare’s legitimate ruler and his reign are substituted by the mafia gangland and its don; by contrast, the only instance of legitimacy is found in the Hindu household of Kaka. Mondal also underlines that Bhardwaj’s movie generally contrasts with one of its alleged sources, *The Godfather*, as, usually, in the mafia world “tenderness within family balances ruthlessness outside it,” which is not the case in *Maqbool* (2017: 3). Chaudhuri, instead, pinpoints that Abbaji does embody the gangland ethic of “ruthlessness combined with benevolence, demanding unquestioning loyalty from his followers,” but halfway through the film the ties of his criminal family are violated by Maqbool and, involuntarily, also by the bodyguard Usman, who, at Nimmi’s urging, gets drunk, thus becoming unable to protect his master (2012: 106-107).

Especially in the post-Partition era, Muslims as main characters, their culture, and their society became the subject of the Bollywood genre termed “Muslim social.” This genre seems to have begun in 1939 with Sohrab Modi’s *Pukar*, then it has continued with Asif’s *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), and later on with movies like Muzaffar Ali’s *Umrao Jaan* (1981). Thanks to these productions, Muslim culture became popular

in Bollywood, as these films used to tackle the typical issues of Bollywood drama (family, marriage, love, rituals, festivals) in a Muslim environment. Nevertheless, since the 1990s and, in particular, since 9/11, Muslim popularity in Bollywood has started to decline. Maidul Islam illustrates three problems occurring in representing or stereotyping Muslims following this decrease. The first and major issue consists in an underrepresentation of Muslim characters in spite of the still strong presence of Muslim actors, directors and music composers in the film industry. The second problem is the misrepresentation of Muslims as violent agents or terrorists. The third is the absence of images of Islamic subjects promoting secularism (cited in García-Periágo, 2014: 73-74).

In *Maqbool*, two scenes are explicitly revealing of the Islamic nature of the society depicted by Bhardwaj. The first scene takes place at Abbaji's mansion while he is having a conversation with a guest. Through a close-up shot, viewers can clearly distinguish that he has *surma* in his eyes, which is a black line supposedly used by Allah. Moreover, he has a beard, he is wearing a white *kurta*²³, and he then offers his guest (or better forces him to eat) a *paan*, which is a preparation of Betel leaf and tobacco: these are all Islamic symbols. In another scene, viewers can see the little Islamic flags that are usually hung out when Ramadan is celebrated. Via a bird's-eye view, the whole of Abbaji's coterie can be spotted as wearing white clothes and having beards. The only exceptions are Kaka, who is wearing a red headband and a green shirt, and his son Guddu, who is dressed in white but does not have a beard. As a matter of fact, they are Hindu, which distinguishes them from the rest of Abbaji's gang. This scene follows the one that shows the whole Islamic community that take a trip, or better a sort of pilgrimage, to a Sufi temple, where *Ru-ba-ru* is performed by *qawwals*. During such a song, the dispersion of the main characters, together with that of the other members of the community (children, youngsters, and elderly people, especially male), creates a metaphorical image of diaspora: their pace is slow, and their facial expressions are sad and tired (García-Periágo, 2014: 74-75).

Along with Muslim symbolism, also moments of prayer are shot in the movie. The first *namaz*²⁴, recited by Nimmi, is represented as an after-sex moment between Nimmi and Maqbool, and it can be compared with Lady Macbeth's invocation of the spirits, when she asks them to unsex and strengthen her in order to be able to persuade

²³ A long, loose, collarless shirt typical of South-Asia.

²⁴ A ritual prayer prescribed by Islam that has to be observed five times a day.

her husband to kill Duncan (1.5.40-54). Though being a silent prayer, in *Maqbool* Nimmi's purpose is the same.

MAQBOOL: What did you ask for?

NIMMI: That every day should pass just like tonight.

MAQBOOL: Not possible whilst he lives.

NIMMI: And after Abbaji is gone?

(0:58:08 – 0:58:58)²⁵

The second *namaz*, instead, is offered by Maqbool and it occurs after Abbaji's assassination and before the killing of Kaka.

NIMMI: Miyan, don't feed the serpent, it'll turn on you. You'll be the first to be bitten.

MAQBOOL: Are the Niyaz preparations over?

NIMMI: The only way Guddu will enter the house in the evening is over my corpse.

MAQBOOL: Wait till it's dark, darling.

NIMMI: You remember the prayers by heart?

MAQBOOL: Yes, why?

NIMMI: I haven't seen you say your prayers ever. You look like a child.

(1:24:58 – 1:25:58)

In between these murderous plans, characters take part in the Muslim festival of Ramzan Eid, the end of Ramadan and a commemoration of good will and friendship (García-Periago, 2014: 75-76). This is a pretty ironic situation in the movie because, as Mondal notices, "*Maqbool* projects a strongly Islamic household that reverberates with petty vendettas, extortion, intoxication, mean plots, and illicit sex" (2017: 3), so the atmosphere is anything but friendly.

Throughout the film, other Islamic tropes appear. For example, Usman, Abbaji's faithful bodyguard, at Nimmi's instigation is forced to drink a whole bottle of an alcoholic drink (which is forbidden in Muslim religion) to prove his loyalty to his lord in front of the gang and, especially, in front of Abbaji's new mistress. More visual symbolism is envisaged by David Mason in the ritual slaughter of three goats before the

²⁵ Throughout this dissertation, all the dialogues and expressions taken from Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* correspond to the English subtitles of the subtitled version of the film available at:

<<https://einthusan.tv/movie/results/?lang=hindi&query=maqbool>>

youngsters' wedding, whose blood then becomes one of Maqbool's hallucinations (García-Periago, 2014: 76). The characters greet each other by using expressions like "Salaam²⁶" and "Khuda Hafiz²⁷", and blue, the colour that saturates the whole movie, and which, for the ancient Indian drama *Natyashastra*, symbolises desire and eroticism, is "the signature hue of Islamic religion and culture": also the precious stones set in Abbaji's rings are blue. In addition, it is astrology, which for Muslims is the equivalent of witchcraft, that decrees the rise and fall of Maqbool (Jess-Cooke, 2006: 178). Being the majority of characters of Islamic religion, all the deaths that occur in the movie seem to be the result of an intra-communal rather than an inter-communal conflict (Mason, 2009: 2). The unique moment of confrontation between Muslims and Hindus takes place after Abbaji's death, when Maqbool and his gun-armed Muslim followers arrive at Kaka's household and are "welcomed" by a line of coloured-turbaned Hindus armed with rifles (Mondal, 2017: 4).

In the whole movie, only four characters are openly Hindu: the already-mentioned Kaka²⁸ and Guddu, and the two policemen, Pandit and Purohit. The names of the two officers are themselves indicative of their religious faith, as they are Brahmin²⁹ names; in addition, they wear their hair in *shikhas*³⁰. Furthermore, their actions and "prophecies" advance the film's plot "as if they were Hindu minor deities" (García-Periago, 2014: 77). Symbolising the extent of Hindu power in today's India, these cops prove to be crucial for the final resolution.

Mondal underlines:

What initially seems as a towering invincible Islamic power structure at the centre of the story is later reduced to a stifled, confined Muslim community, circumscribed, moulded and contained by the Hindu authorities with the age-old ideological weapons of caste, erudition and state machinery represented by the two so-called "law-keepers." (2017: 6)

²⁶ Standard Muslim salutation meaning "Peace be upon you."

²⁷ "Goodbye," literally "May God be your Guardian."

²⁸ Though Hindu religion is less represented than Islam, it is meaningful that Kaka, always wearing the traditional *bind* painted on his forehead, is shot dead while praying at Goddess Kali's temple together with another moustached man.

²⁹ A Brahmin is a member of the highest Hindu caste, which is that of priesthood.

³⁰ This word generally indicates a lock of hair left on top or back of a shaven head, today usually worn by orthodox Brahmins and temple priests. The cops' heads are not shaven, but they have a tuft of hair in the crown of their heads, allegedly a sign of Vaishnava devotion.

The same idea is conveyed by Guddu and Sameera's marriage, which is supposed to end the Muslim authority and to begin a Hindu "regime" (Chaudhury, 2016: 530). The film, however, is usually interpreted as a criticism of Indian corrupt politics and political system more than as a condemnation of the displaced Muslim community and its intra- or inter-communal relationships (García-Periago, 2014: 76).

3.2 The characters

3.2.1 The power relationship between Nimmi and Maqbool

The pivot around which the plot of *Maqbool* revolves is the love affair between Nimmi and Maqbool. Unlike the Macbeths, who are happily married, love each other and share secrets and ambitions, the relationship between Nimmi and Maqbool is represented as a forbidden pleasure, as Nimmi is Abbaji's young mistress, and Abbaji has always been a father-figure for Maqbool. Precisely for this reason, in the introductory scenes, the gangster does not indulge his desire for the woman, and only halfway through the film they appear as a couple: he gives up to her provocations to the point that he betrays his master and, with her connivance, murders him. In the film, different incitements on Nimmi's part prove to be more effective than Maqbool's own ambition, which is thus not his unique motivation for the murder. She manages to persuade him with various physical and verbal expedients, especially by revealing to him the love relationship between Guddu and Sameera. Nimmi makes Miyan notice that, by the rise of Guddu in the gang via his marriage with Abbaji's daughter, his high and esteemed position would certainly be jeopardised and, in the future, Guddu's position of son-in-law would bring him to the head of the gang. While not entirely convinced of the truthfulness of her words, Maqbool feels resentment at the idea of serving under that youngster. "You can die for me and even kill," she concludes. "Now, is that a lie?" (0:24:34 – 0:24:45) (García-Periago, 2014: 65-66). On her part, though probably being herself "the latest in a series of nubile concubines of Abbaji" (Mondal, 2017: 2), Nimmi's decision to kill the don seems to also be dictated by the fact that he has recently replaced her with a new heartthrob, a Bollywood actress. Her resolution is nonetheless precedent to the apparition of Miss Mohini on the screen, and, together with her love for Maqbool, it is triggered by her repulsion for Abbaji's physical appearance and by their age difference.

After having worn the same necklace of flowers put on the neck of sacrificial goats, Nimmi turns to Miyan and exclaims:

It's time you sacrificed me too. Jahangir has got a new mistress. How can I face going home? Everyone knows I'm Jahangir's mistress. He looks disgusting with his clothes off. He must be my father's age.

MAQBOOL: And he is my father! I've been brought up in this house.

NIMMI: Even dogs are brought up in houses, Miyan. I can't see you wagging your tail grovelling behind Guddu. You'll have to kill one of us. Me... or Jahangir.

(1:09:22 – 1:10:24)

Also in *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth is concerned with Duncan's age and confesses that she would murder the king herself were it not that he looks like her father.

LADY MACBETH: Had he not resembled

My father as he slept, I had done't.

(2.2.13-14)

Bhardwaj amplified Shakespeare's narrative by expanding the motivations of the "murdering duo," but, differently from the play, in my personal opinion, viewers tend to sympathise with the couple, for instance during the *Rone Do* interlude, when Maqbool tries to console a desperately weeping and apparently sincere Nimmi, or when, at the peak of her physical and mental sufferance, she dies in his resigned arms. The true emotions she feels for Maqbool prevent her from being a mere carnal body for Abbaji and also from being considered a plain figure of evil. The couple's sentiments for each other, however, remain the alleged cause of the whole tragedy; Nimmi is really instrumental in the development of the movie and, as Jha notes, "[i]t's because of her that the otherwise heroic tragedy *Macbeth* turns into a story of failed love" (2016: 309).

Though in Bhardwaj Nimmi never asks the spirits to unsex her and her femininity is never questioned, Mondal states that the director closely followed the playwright insofar that in both the film and the play women "create confusion in the realm of mental representation by exhibiting the so-called "masculine" traits of their characters: aberrant, uncontrolled, having a will of their own and imposing that will on their male counterpart" (2017: 4-5). In so doing, they represent a threat to the patriarchal structure. As a matter of fact, both Macbeth's "legitimate" wife and Abbaji's and Maqbool's "illegitimate" concubine deceive and manipulate their partners to achieve their ends. Both, however, also share a fate of insanity: "by actively seducing their men and coercing them for murder, they come dangerously close to shaping their own destiny, menacingly close to controlling the narrative" (Mondal, 2017: 5). At the peak

of their mental instability, while in her dark castle Lady Macbeth sleepwalks and re-enacts moments from the night of Duncan's assassination surveilled by the Doctor and the Gentlewoman, pregnant Nimmi is left confined within the walls of her house, where she is verbally abused and physically humiliated by Guddu and Sameera, thus appearing more as a pitying object than a symbol of fertility. Mondal describes the condition of the two "Lady" using a powerful, disturbing image:

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 a devastated mind unable to cohabit any longer with sanity. (2017: 5)

In clear opposition to the Shakespearean female prototype, Nimmi gives birth prematurely to a son who is ultimately lulled by Guddu and Sameera, becoming their "trophy" (for Mondal, 2017: 5) or rather in an act of humanity beyond any personal or gang rivalry (according to Tiwari, 2016: 170). In a certain sense, this child, born of premature labour, can be interpreted as a cinematic rendering of the Shakespearean child that was untimely ripped from his mother's womb and that, according to the Sisters' prophecy, is the one to vanquish Macbeth.

SECOND APPARITION: *a bloody child*

2 APPARITION: Macbeth, Macbeth, Macbeth.

MACBETH: Had I three ears, I'd hear thee.

2 APPARITION: Be bloody, bold, and resolute: laugh to scorn

The power of man, for none of woman born

Shall harm Macbeth.

(4.1.76-80)

Nimmi, after having given birth, appears completely different from the resolute and feisty woman she was at the beginning of the movie: in her obsessive and compulsive mental weakness, she has become a pathetic creature, ill and neurotic. This madness is symbolised by her trying to wash the bloodstains she thinks she sees on the walls of the bedroom (the same in which Abbaji was killed). Blood is only a product of her imagination as Bhardwaj's shooting using a dual perspective demonstrates. On the one hand, the audience watch Maqbool while he is looking at Nimmi who is trying to clean the traces of blood; on the other hand, they see her reflected in the wardrobe mirror. Both when she tries to clean her face and when she washes the walls in vain,

viewers are made aware of the hallucinatory nature of her gestures (Mondal, 2017: 5). Finally, lying in Maqbool's arms, she keeps repeating three questions that encapsulate all her paranoia, grief, physical and mental weakness:

“I am going mad, aren't I?”
“Miyan, was everything a sin?”
“Our love was chaste, wasn't it?”
(1:57:45 – 1:59:58)

The last image we see of the Indian Lady Macbeth is her body covered by her own *dupatta*³¹, thus transformed into her *kafn*³². She dies of a combination of childbirth and guilt, but she does not commit suicide, which is not accepted in Indian culture (Mondal, 2017: 5).

The love relationship between Nimmi and Maqbool remains secret and illicit until Abbaji's assassination, following which everything that belonged to Abbaji is transferred to Maqbool's hands, including Nimmi. From this moment on, she performs the wife's role: though interpreting the common Bollywood part of the fallen woman, she appears to be an uncommon prostitute that becomes a wife and a mother (Dutta, 2013: 41). Soon she gets pregnant; at the news, however, Maqbool clouds over, as he is not totally sure that the baby is his and not Abbaji's. Nimmi insists that the baby is the gangster's, but she is nonetheless ready to have an abortion. According to Mondal, Maqbool's doubts are instances of an illegitimate overreacher (as he is) craving for legitimacy (2017: 3). In spite of the different context, Nimmi's disposition towards her son is comparable with Lady Macbeth's willingness to kill her own 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 so sworn as you
Have done to this.
(1.7.54-58)

³¹ Sort of long scarf worn by women in India, conventionally a symbol of modesty and honour.

³² Shroud.

The murdering duo plots the assassination together, but Nimmi holds the reins. As already stated, she plants the seed of treachery in Maqbool's mind when they are by the roadside before the funeral. The background to this first scene together is a loud, raucous chatter of crows and other birds which reminds Shakespearean scholars of *Macbeth's* lines "the raven himself is hoarse / That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan / Under my battlements" (1.5.38-40) (Trivedi, 2007: 155). A prelude to Nimmi's murderous plan, instead, can be detected at the beginning of the movie, during a family meal in Abbaji's mansion. Abbaji seems to choke with a piece of food, so Maqbool runs to the kitchen to fetch some water. Nimmi has a pitcher in her hands but she refuses to give it to Maqbool. "Is that all you're thirsty for?" she asks (0:19:00 – 0:19:05). Another relevant episode before the murder is the moment when Maqbool reveals to Abbaji the feeling that ties Guddu and Sameera. In order to prove the truthfulness of Nimmi's words and, at the same time, to separate the two youngsters, the gangster chooses Guddu as the one who has to move to Abbaji's new resort in Mauritius, thus also provoking a violent reaction on Kaka's part, so much so that he starts chasing his son and hitting him violently.

At Guddu's confession of his true feelings for Sameera, however, the marriage between the two is arranged: Nimmi's "prediction" seems to be on the point of becoming true. This scene is followed by the one in which Nimmi forces Maqbool to declare his love for her: she takes his gun and, aiming at him, she compels him to repeat "my love." According to Ferleman, this moment can be interpreted as a retextualisation of the dagger scene in *Macbeth* (2009: 3). At the beginning, Maqbool thinks that the woman is joking, so he tries to have his gun back. After she fires and misses him slightly, he is convinced to repeat what she wants. This allegedly proves that it is Nimmi who leads to Maqbool's death. Furthermore, "[t]he loaded gun in Nimmi's hand speaks to Maqbool's helplessness relative to the intimate, intimidating presence of Nimmi's seductive sexuality" (Ferleman, 2009: 4). After having done what she wanted and having had his gun back, however, Maqbool slaps her, calls her "whore," and tells her to return to her mother town, Luckworn, making her weep and thus testifying to the volatility and derangement of her apparently intense power. In the analysis of this scene, Ferleman interprets Nimmi's sexuality as telling of her fecundity and future pregnancy, while the gun is seen as the symbol of her sexual power over Maqbool, as the gun, like the dagger, is a common emblem of phallic symbolism. Similarly to Lady Macbeth, Nimmi appears to hurt Maqbool's manliness (Ferleman, 2009: 4).



Figure 6

Before the killing of Abbaji, Nimmi gives Maqbool another ultimatum, asking him to choose between her and his don. This time, he aims the gun at her head, he does fire, but the gun is unloaded, so this makes her understand he has chosen to get rid of his “father.”



Figure 7

On the designated night, Nimmi makes the loyal Usman drink a whole bottle of alcohol, exploiting the fact that he can do anything for his master. After Usman and the coterie have fallen asleep, Maqbool takes the bodyguard’s gun and enters Abbaji and Nimmi’s bedroom. Abbaji is asleep, while Nimmi is awake waiting for him. After having applied a silencer to the gun, Maqbool shoots Abbaji through the white net that surrounds the bed and kills him by firing right into his heart. His blood splashes onto Nimmi’s face. Abbaji wakes up and seems like sitting on the floor; he opens his eyes, he looks at Maqbool, but finally dies. Maqbool’s following fear of Kaka’s gaze during the “banquet scene” (here a meeting of the gang and a subsequent collective moment of prayer for Abbaji’s soul) is precisely linked to this moment in which the don dies staring directly at him (Tiwari, 2016: 169). While, according to Rothwell (quoted in Ferleman, 2009: 3), in Shakespeare Macbeth “murdered himself when he murdered Duncan,” according to Ferleman, in Bhardwaj Maqbool “murders himself when he agrees to “fall” in love with Nimmi” (2009: 3). And yet, similarly to Brabantio’s admonition to Othello (*Othello*, 1.3.293-294), Abbaji had previously warned Miyan by pronouncing the sentence: “Love is a disease, Miyan. The world is in my grasp except for this runt of a woman” (0:21:54 – 0:22:04).

Critics have interpreted Nimmi and Maqbool’s love story in other two ways: as a Greek tragedy, particularly evident when Nimmi, in Maqbool’s arms, asks him

repeatedly if their love is pure (Jess-Cooke, 2006: 178); and as a manifestation of the oedipal complex. In this second interpretation, Abbaji is a father-figure for Maqbool, while Nimmi is perceived as a mother-figure since she is Abbaji's mistress. Maqbool needs to kill his "father" in order to fulfil his desire for the "mother": this sexual desire seems to be the predominant transgression in the movie and the engine of its plot. The assassination appears as a real parricide, after which both members of the couple slowly, but inevitably, plunge into guilt, lose their grip with reality, and finally surrender (Chaudhuri, 2012: 106; Dutta, 2013: 41).

3.2.2 Pandit and Purohit's clairvoyance and their connivance with Mumbai's gangland

In *Maqbool*, the three Shakespearean Weird Sisters become two corrupt, clairvoyant police officers, Pandit and Purohit. Unlike the dozen representations of *Macbeth* (even in gangland situations) in which the Witches have always been female, Bhardwaj chose to turn them into two middle-aged men, whose names already say something about their nature (Trivedi, 2007: 156). "Purohit" (a family priest in the context of Hindu religion) may be defined as "a sanctioned practitioner of religion with immense power wielding capacity in society." "Pandit" (literally a scholar specialised in Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy and religion, who is typically a practising priest too) is "a producer of knowledge: one who is entrusted with the task of rationalising and thereby legitimising the power Purohit wields" (Mondal, 2017: 4).

Like in the tragedy, where, during a stormy night, the Witches' enigmatic "singsong" "fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.10) establishes the atmosphere of the entire play, the film begins with a scene focused on the two policemen and their enigmas. In particular, it starts with a close-up shot of a *kundal motif*, a horoscope grid used by Indian astrologers. On a rainy and windy night, Pandit draws this grid on the fogged window pane of the van that the two cops use to monitor the underworld and guard their prisoners (García-Periago, 2014: 64-65). The horoscope is Mumbai's.

PUROHIT: Whose horoscope is that?

PANDIT: Mumbai's.

[...]

PUROHIT: Mumbai's horoscope!!! So, what does it predict?

(0:02:15 – 0:02:25)

In the van, the police officers are apparently joking off with a gangster: even when the camera focuses on the horoscope or on one of the two cops, viewers can hear laughs in the background. The gangster Pandit and Purohit are keeping in custody belongs to the gang that has killed the brother of Abbaji, the don they have always helped in his illegal affairs.

PUROHIT: The 40th day of mourning ends at 12 o'clock. It will end tonight for your gang.

[...]

PANDIT: Miyan has given his word.

[...]

PUROHIT: Panditji is never wrong. Ask him what Mumbai's forecast predicts. Abbaji or Mughal?

PANDIT: Maqbool. Miyan Maqbool.

(0:03:20 – 0:03:56; the camera switches its focus from the horoscope to Maqbool's face)



Figure 8

The prisoner is asked where his master, Mughal (comparable to Macdonald), and his master's son, Boti (Macduff), are. Afraid for his life, he confesses everything to Maqbool on the phone; he is shot dead nonetheless, and his blood splashes on the window pane, covering the horoscope in blood.

PANDIT: Watch it, man. You have painted Mumbai red.

(0:06:00 – 0:06:04)



Figure 9

This first scene, ending with such an admonition to Purohit, seems to convey the purpose of warning viewers of the inevitable bloodshed that characterises the film they are going to watch. The predictions Pandit has started to make since the beginning

introduce the supernatural element of *Macbeth* into a film that has a very real and realistic setting (Chaudhury, 2016: 529-530). Throughout the movie, the chart the police officer has drawn on the window pane is continuously repeated and, each time, it is made with different objects, like sand, or with pieces of food, like curry and sweets. For instance, the cops make their second prediction after having drawn two horoscopes on two trays by using sauces. While Shakespeare's Witches meet Banquo and Macbeth upon a heath, Bhardwaj's policemen are comfortably sat in a living room with Banquo's and Macbeth's Indian counterparts, Kaka and Maqbool.

KAKA: Miyan and in love. Miyan and women. What else is Miyan inheriting?

PANDIT (to Maqbool): Your bad days are over. You'll get what you desire. Whatever.

KAKA: For instance?

PANDIT: Bollywood.

KAKA: Bollywood! That's Abbaji's brother-in-law's turf. That Asif will come howling to him.

PANDIT (to Maqbool): Your comet has entered the 7th position in your Venus chart. This position heralds your kingly reign. Forget Bollywood. In six months³³, Abbaji's throne is going to be Miyan's. King of Kings.

[...]

KAKA: Any forecasts for me Panditji. Take your time.

[...]

KAKA: I've shot as many guys as Miyan that includes today's lot.

PANDIT: I've seen your son's chart. The lad has real promise.

PUROHIT: He's the antidote to Miyan.

(0:08:28 – 0:11:02)

Soon afterwards, Maqbool's mobile phone rings and, "by coincidence," it is a woman, presumably Nimmi ("Miyan and in love. Miyan and women"). Also the prediction about managing Bollywood affairs comes true, as Asif, Abbaji's brother-in-law, is discovered to be the traitor that has caused Abbaji's brother's death. Asked by Abbaji to shoot him, Asif shoots himself. During the subsequent meeting of the gang, one of its members asks:

What about the film industry? Who's going to look after it?

³³ In *Macbeth*, there are no temporal indications.

ABBAAJI: Maqbool.

MAQBOOL: Abbaji, I wouldn't know what to do with it.

ABBAAJI: Restore Abba's glory.

(0:17:14 – 0:17:46)

This Bollywood prophecy corresponds to the Witches' hailing of Macbeth as "Thane of Cawdor," a prediction that soon comes true. In effect, after the Sisters have vanished, Ross, another thane, informs Macbeth of his newly conferred title of "Thane of Cawdor." As a matter of fact, Cawdor has betrayed King Duncan and has thus been condemned to death.

The last prophecy the two policemen make to Maqbool in the living-room scene is that he will rule the gang he is part of as "King of Kings." Kaka, instead, is predicted to seize power within Abbaji's coterie; his son Guddu, in particular, will become the "antidote to Miyan." At the beginning, Maqbool seems not to be very seriously interested in what the cops are blathering; then, when he learns that Kaka's line will be the one to dominate, he starts showing concern. Unlike Macbeth, who understands the Witches' predictions as evidence of his future rise, Maqbool interprets Pandit's words as an indication of his demise (Ferleman, 2009: 3).

November rain is the atmospheric agent that opens the movie; rain is also another of Pandit's prophecies, this time at a very unusual moment of the year.

PUROHIT: No trace of clouds in the sky. You really think it will rain? It will only rain in June, at the wedding.

PANDIT: Wedding?

PUROHIT: Any problem?

PANDIT: The girl is cursed. She'll leave behind a trail of corpses before she weds.

(1:10:35 – 1:10:56)

Such bad weather actually comes and creates a gloomy atmosphere of tension before Abbaji's murder. As Tiwari notes, the scene of rain "translates into cinematic terms the Shakespearean technique of mirroring an upheaval in the moral order by an unnatural upheaval in the natural order" (2016: 170). This chaotic night can parallel the Shakespearean night of Duncan's assassination, a night marked by confusion in nature. The words of *Macbeth's* old man and *Maqbool's* old female servant express the same idea:

OLD MAN: Threescore and ten I can remember well,
Within the volume of which time I have seen
Hours dreadful and things strange; but this sore night
Hath trifled former knowings.

(2.4.1-4)

OLD WOMAN: Strange night. For the first time in 70 years I'll see rain in this
season.

(1:13:16 – 1:13:26)

Before Guddu and Sameera's wedding, Pandit and Purohit purposely recall Abbaji's wedding ceremony, during which a murder was committed. Unlike Duncan, Jahangir has a murky and violent past, as he murdered the former leader of the gang to gain power. In this way, Maqbool's killing of his don is made part of a ritual that marks the boss's cycle, thus partially justifying Maqbool's deed. By telling the gangster this story, Pandit also reinforces the cops' influence in manoeuvring the characters' destiny. By contrast, the Shakespearean Witches are not involved in the development of Macbeth's actions at all (García-Periago, 2014: 72-73). Furthermore, rather than being limited to predicting the future like the Weird Sisters, the two police officers are also responsible for the characters' fate. For example, their decision not to kill Boti is particularly relevant for the film plot as Boti is the character that kills Maqbool in the last scene of the movie. The philosophy the two cops follow is that of "shakti ka santulan," that is a balance of power obtained by letting fire and water confront. In effect, the motif of the whole film can be said to be: "It's critical to maintain the balance of power in this world. Fire must fear water" (Trivedi, 2007: 157).

In Shakespeare, the Sisters are portrayed as agents of malevolent fate who have acquired power by selling their souls to Satan. Nevertheless, even though they can predict fate, they are not Fate themselves. Unlike them, Purohit, and especially Pandit, both foresee the workings of fate and identify with it. In these terms, the scene in which Purohit "eats Saturn" is particularly significant (Mondal, 2017: 4).

PUROHIT: What if I swallowed Saturn?

PANDIT: Men don't eclipse Saturn, Saturn feeds on men, and these days it's
famished.

(1:37:10 – 1:37:20)

Despite the cops' involvement into action, however, they practically do very little. Unlike Shakespeare's tragedy, where the Witches kill and trade in body parts, they let prisoners off or are unable to make them speak. For instance, Purohit is shown while beating one of the prisoners with a cane to make him speak. As he does not manage to, he finally shoots him dead. With the prisoner's blood, Pandit draws another chart and makes another prophecy (Trivedi, 2007: 157).

PANDIT: Boti and Guddu are not kids. It's all the moon's fault, Miyan.

PUROHIT: No, it's all Abbaji's fault. He let Boti off to prepare for Miyan's last rites.

PANDIT: Everything has gone haywire in the last two months. There's supposed to be an eclipse in three days time. As long as that passes.

(1:44:28 – 1:44:52)

The last prediction of all concerns Maqbool's final defeat. Just as Macbeth goes searching for the Witches to find out his fate, Maqbool decides to meet the cops. The three reunite on the beach, where Pandit draws the chart on the sand.

PANDIT: There hasn't been such an eclipse for 80 years now. Many big boys drown then.

MAQBOOL: Will I sink or sail?

PUROHIT: How can you sink Miyan? The police are with you. Bhosle's backing you up. That leaves Guddu and Boti. And if I don't bump them off by tomorrow, go ahead and banish me.

MAQBOOL: Will I sink or sail?

PANDIT: Now, if the sea comes up to your house, then you'll sink... obviously sink...

(1:45:06 – 1:45:42)

Suggesting a parallel with the coming of Great Birnam Wood to Dunsinane in *Macbeth*, the inspectors predict that the gangster will be safe as long as the sea does not enter his house. This does happen metaphorically when, at night, some customs agents led by Devsare foil a smuggling deal at the port and, subsequently, in daylight, they organise a raid of Maqbool's mansion. Pandit and Purohit intervene and drive the gangster away before the customs police are able to find him. They drive him to the hospital, where Maqbool wants to take his newborn son with him and then run away to the airport. The two police officers warn him that it is almost time for his flight, but Maqbool is

nonetheless resolved to have his baby back, which will decree his end (Tiwari, 2016: 168).

Bhardwaj decided to deprive the film of ghosts, as well as of witches. The only reference to witches is made by Sameera who, when the situation has already precipitated after the killing of her father, before eloping with Guddu attacks Nimmi and calls her “witch” (García-Periago, 2014: 65).

SAMEERA: Lay off, witch. You devoured my father’s blood, you witch.

(1:48:00 – 1:48:08)

Sameera herself, an emotional and fearful young woman, in certain moments seems to be a witchy character. The most impressive example can be found between 1:35:34 and 1:36:25, when Maqbool enters her room and, trying to convince her that Guddu killed her father, throws her engagement ring away. As a reaction, she starts screaming at him in a piercing and uncontrolled way. Her shriek subsequently parallels with the supposed wailing of Nimmi’s baby, which she says she hears continuously from her womb and which prevents her from sleeping. Ghosts, instead, are replaced by visions and flashbacks that haunt and torment Maqbool. The first vision he has occurs after Abbaji’s detention, when Kaka tells him that Abbaji is resting with Nimmi. Maqbool leans against a pillar of the mansion; he has his eyes closed and, in his vision of the don caressing Nimmi’s naked back, he sees her staring at him.

Maqbool’s second vision, instead, occurs on the night of the assassination. Critics agree that seeing unwashed blood (presumably that of the goats sacrificed during the day) which comes out from the terrace where the gangster has cooked for the wedding banquet gives him further incitement to commit the crime and is comparable to the dagger scene in the tragedy (2.1.33-61) (Sen, 2010: 230-231). Immediately afterwards, Maqbool has a series of other hallucinations, a mixture of flashbacks that are rendered in black and white: he remembers Pandit’s first predictions, he sees Abbaji that kisses Nimmi’s bruised foot after the funeral, he has visions of don and mistress on the point of making love and, then, he has a flashback of the night of love he has spent with Nimmi. He finally remembers the moment when he has aimed the gun at Nimmi’s head, but has chosen to kill “his father.”

In the film, Banquo’s ghost is substituted by a hallucination of Kaka’s corpse (brought to Maqbool’s house by the cops-witches) opening his eyes and staring at Maqbool, while, in reality, he is dead and his face is not directed towards the gangster

but lies on the floor in the opposite direction. Bhardwaj allegedly made this choice because ghosts are not recurring elements in Bollywood cinema. The final vision Maqbool has takes place when he re-enters the mansion after having been to the hospital and having taken Nimmi away. In this hallucination, he sees all the dead (Abbaji, Kaka, Usman and the old female servant) that dance together, in circle, in an enlightened room, and he probably hears the music that drives them as well.

To conclude on Pandit and Purohit, it can finally be noticed that, as underlined by Trivedi, the two cops acquire shades of Shakespeare's wise fools, taking some of the functions of the Porter too, thus providing "comic relief" (2007: 157). For example, they urinate in unison off the first-floor balcony after the rainy night and they compete to see who pisses higher. Before the rain, instead, after having drawn charts with food, Pandit sticks his tongue out of the mouth; scene and setting change, but, when the camera comes back to the policemen, Pandit is caught with his tongue still out of the mouth, so much so that he seems to have remained in that position all the time.



Figure 10

3.3 Analysis of a scene

3.3.1 The main character's death in Bhardwaj, Besson, Shakespeare and Kurosawa

In this section, I compare the ending of *Maqbool* with the ending of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, by focusing, in particular, on the main character's death. Moreover, I analyse the ending of two of the sources used by Bhardwaj: Luc Besson's *Léon: The Professional* (1994) and Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957).

In the ending of *Maqbool*, the protagonist, after having been driven to the Asian Hospital of Mumbai by Pandit and Purohit, enters the building wearing a hood in order not to be recognised. An aerial view shows the audience the hospital and the people who are walking on the pavement in front of its entrance. Maqbool, dressed with a blue shirt and a pair of white trousers, walks towards the lifts, where he sees Guddu who is waiting to go upstairs. Guddu enters the lift, while Maqbool runs to the stairs. A shot showing the display screen of the lift indicating the number of the floor the lift is at

follows Maqbool's sprint in the opposite direction. In the lift, a man, whose face is not recognisable, checks his watch, a gesture that contributes to marking the excitement and confusion of the moment. The camera is then positioned on the landing of the stairs, and it catches Maqbool who runs frantically upstairs. This scene is alternated with another one that shows Guddu inside the lift: he looks upwards and, in this moment, the focus changes and the camera stops on the display, which switches from floor one to floor two. The following shot shows Maqbool again: the camera seems to be positioned on a landing of the stairs similar to that of the previous scene; this time, however, it does not film Maqbool that runs towards it but it catches him from the back. The film continues with the same alternation (Guddu – number of floor – Maqbool that runs upstairs) until Guddu reaches floor number four, which is where the maternity ward is located. Maqbool follows: the background music plays deadened sounds that well represent the seriousness of the situation and every other voice is silenced. Maqbool peeks at Guddu through the window of a door; he takes out his gun, locks and loads it, and seems to be ready to intervene. At this point, however, he sees a nurse that accompanies Sameera to Guddu: Sameera is cradling his baby. She passes the “neatly swaddled infant” to Guddu in an act of human care and nurture, thus depicting a perfect family portrait (Verma, 2012: 92-95)³⁴. Maqbool is gobsmacked and cannot believe his eyes. In this moment, he feels completely impotent and decides to surrender to his fate. He flattens his nose on the window, looks downwards, then closes his eyes. When he reopens them, he retreats from the window, leaving it clouded with his breath. He lets his gun fall on the floor and moves backwards, while still keeping the look at his son. The camera focuses on his gun left on the floor, whilst in the back viewers can glimpse the out-of-focus image of Maqbool's feet while he is leaving the ward. Resigned, he arrives at the ground floor and exits the building. While leaving, he comes across Boti. Maqbool seems to glance at him, but he does not stop. Boti, instead, looks behind his back, probably to check if Maqbool is followed by some other member of the gang, then takes out his gun, aims at the gangster's back, and starts calling him. The audience do not hear any sound of his voice, only the music in the background; they can nonetheless read the movement of his lips. He screams “Miyan!”. Receiving neither an answer nor a glance, Boti looks upwards, then shoots. In the meanwhile, a black crow is flying in the sky above the hospital. Viewers witness Maqbool's death not from Boti's perspective nor from

³⁴ According to Chaudhuri, the “naked newborn baby” of act 1.7 here acquires a literal (and visual) existence rather than a mere metaphorical one (2012: 92).

someone else's. It is as if the camera was set in the gangster's eyes, so much so that the audience see the screen moving left and right, then reddening at Boti's second shot. A woman's scream and the sound of a car horn are heard as well. The last thing Maqbool's eyes see is the sun. The sky becomes blue again, while the camera lingers on the gangster's face. He tries to keep his eyes open, but he does not manage to. He finally closes them. The film ends on this scene, on the image of Maqbool's face. As I am going to show, the focus on the tyrant's head is the common thread of all the four endings which I have decided to analyse. Verma underlines that the conclusion of the Indian movie is peculiarly complex because it does not ascertain that the protagonist's death puts an end to the cycle of violence started with Abbaji's assassination, though some hope has been brought about by Inspector Devsare's coming back. A new balance in the forces of law and order also seems to follow the astrologically-minded cops' failed attempt to keep their proverbial balance by making Maqbool escape. Moreover, Guddu, who during the movie has always appeared reluctant to kill anyone, is allegedly going to be the new leader of the gang and to marry Sameera in an interreligious ceremony, thus symbolising a final communal harmony (2012: 95). Chaudhuri, however, underpins that, at the close, viewers are not left with "any assurance of law" (2012: 106) but can only make assumptions, for example about whether the baby's uncertain paternity could, in the future, reverse the situation.



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13

Critics agree on saying that, to film *Maqbool's* ending, Bhardwaj was inspired by Léon's death in Besson's *Léon* (1994). In the conclusion of this movie, Léon (an Italian professional assassin), after having successfully made his 12-year-old protégée, Mathilda, escape during an ESU/DEA raid, disguises as a wounded ESU officer and wears an ESU gas mask that allows him to both go unnoticed and breathe better. He is thus able to go out of his apartment without being recognised by anyone saved by Stansfield, a drug addict agent of DEA that has killed the whole of Mathilda's family, including her little brother. Léon, who is comparable to Maqbool/Macbeth, goes down the stairs, arrives at the ground floor, and takes off the mask. The camera focuses on the exit: he "sees the light." A shot of his face is suddenly alternated with a shot of

Stansfield's face, here comparable to Boti. Viewers see Stansfield raising his gun and aiming at Léon. He continues to follow Léon while keeping the gun aimed at his back; Léon, on his part, does not stop, and goes on walking towards the exit. It seems impossible that he has not realised that he has Stansfield at his back, but he apparently does not care about it. At this point, the camera focuses on the cane of the gun, then, as in *Maqbool*, it appears to set in Léon's eyes. The audience do not hear the sound of the shot; they only see the camera teetering first left and right and, finally, upside-down. Unlike *Maqbool*, the screen does not redden³⁵. On the contrary, light intensifies until the screen becomes almost completely white. After a brief interlude that shows Mathilda running away, viewers are shown Léon's blood-soaked body, while outside the lights of a police car flash. Stansfield lowers Léon's arm with his gun and positions himself over him, standing with his legs astride Léon's legs. Léon, who has not died yet, gives Stansfield a ring and tells him that it is from Mathilda. He then closes his eyes. Stansfield opens his hand and sees the ring; having doubts about its nature, he unbuttons Léon's jacket and discovers an explosive belt. He does not have the time to escape that it explodes (this is the so-called "ring trick"); the explosion is filmed from the outside: fire and flames cover everything, particularly the blue car of the police that is parked in front of the entrance. In the ending of *Léon*, order is restored and, unlike *Maqbool*, everything seems to be again in its place: both Léon and Stansfield die, thus symbolically expiating their sins, while Mathilda, after having attempted in vain to convince the mafia boss Tony that she can be a "cleaner" for him, decides to return to the boarding school she has abandoned at the beginning of the movie.



Figure 14

In *Macbeth* the play, Macbeth dies after a fight with Macduff (*Maqbool*'s Boti). In act 5.5, a messenger warns the tyrant that he has seen the wood of Birnam move. At first, the lord does not believe him and threatens to hang him alive, then he begins to be

³⁵ In a previous scene, Léon was going down the outside stairs of the flat wearing a bloodstained ESU gas mask. The camera was set in his eyes, behind the mask; as a consequence, the frames of that sequence appear bloodstained too, as "red" as in *Maqbool*.

afraid that the Witches' prophecy, "Fear not, till Birnam Wood / Do come to Dunsinane" (5.5.43-44), is coming true. Thus, Macbeth also starts wondering about who the man that was not born of a woman and that is destined to defeat him could be, which is the second part of the prediction: in combat, he kills his first opponent, Young Siward. In the meanwhile, Macbeth's army and castle are overwhelmed by the English forces of Malcom (Guddu); the tyrant remains alone, abandoned by anyone. He has to face Macduff but he seems not to worry too much because he knows that he will be won only by a man who was not born of a woman, which does not make sense to him. Macduff, however, reveals that he was actually born by caesarean section:

Despair thy charm,
And let the angel whom thou still hast served
Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb
Untimely ripped
(5.8.14-16)

At this point, Macbeth thinks of surrendering, but, at Macduff's words of challenge, he changes his mind and affirms:

I will not yield,
To kiss the ground before young Malcom's feet,
And to be baited with the rabble's curse.
Though Birnam Wood be come to Dunsinane,
And thou opposed, being of no woman born,
Yet I will try the last. Before my body
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff,
And damned be him that first cries, 'Hold, enough!'
(5.8.28-34)

These are the last words pronounced by the tyrant. After a fighting offstage, Macduff re-enters the stage carrying Macbeth's head. With the tyrant's head in his hands, he declares Malcom king of Scotland.

Hail King, for so thou art. Behold where stands
Th'usurper's cursed head: the time is free.
I see thee compassed with thy kingdom's pearl,
That speak my salutation in their minds;

Whose voices I desire aloud with mine.
Hail, King of Scotland.
(5.9.20-25)

The play ends with a monologue by the new king, who announces the creation of the first earls of Scotland, the repatriation of those friends who have been exiled to flee Macbeth's tyranny, and the trial to the ministers of the former King and Queen, whose alleged suicide is also made known. Malcom finally invites his audience at Scone to attend his coronation: in the source play, order is thus restored.

The ending of black-and-white *Throne of Blood* distances itself from the other three, especially from those of the other two films, but it is nonetheless worth quoting, particularly because, according to Chaudhuri, Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* was directly inspired by its Japanese counterpart, which entails a cult status in Indian art cinema circles (2012: 101). In the ending scenes, seeing his enemies approaching his castle hidden behind cut-down trees, Washizu, the 16th-century samurai Macbeth, orders his army to attack, only to discover that they have betrayed him and left him to his fate: they do not move; on the contrary, they start firing arrows at him. The scene that follows is grotesque and dramatic at the same time, as Washizu keeps screaming desperately while trying to avoid the hail of arrows. One of the weapons finally reaches his throat, giving him the mortal wound. Once again, the main focus of the camera is on the tyrant's head and on his warrior grimace, which is arrested "into a demonic mask-like rigidity" (Hindle, 2007: 106-107). All sounds stop. Washizu staggers down the stairs and faces his army. Proving to be a samurai warrior to the end, he tries to unsheathe his sword, but he falls miserably on the ground, and there remains. The very last scene of the movie is framed by a chorus of deep, droning male voices singing of a "proud warrior murdered by ambition," while in the misty landscape a wooden monolithic monument reminds of the site of the Spiderweb's Castle (Hindle, 2007: 101). Also in this version of the play, order is supposedly restored.



Figure 15

Chapter 4

Omkaara (2006)

4.1 The context

According to Saltz (2014), Bhardwaj's trilogy makes Shakespeare's tragedies "seem a natural lens through which to view contemporary India." In his *Omkaara* (2006), for instance, *Othello* is updated and transplanted to the world of corrupt politicians and their gangsters in the northern Indian region of Uttar Pradesh.

In India, *Othello* has been staged since the 19th century. As pointed out in the introductory chapters, the first Indian actor to feature in the lead role was a Bengali man famously nicknamed Addy, who performed in 1848 at the Sans Souci Theatre in Kolkata. In relatively more recent years, some critical attention has been attracted by Ajoy Kar's *Saptapadi* (1961), a Bengali film that includes a stage performance of *Othello* murdering Desdemona, and by a Kathakali dance³⁶ version of the play. In Indian translations, adaptations, and critiques, *Othello* tends to be treated as an articulation of individual freedom and romantic love, as opposed to patriarchal dictates and familial pressure, with a specific focus on romance and marriage. According to Paromita Chakravarti, this view is due to the play's affinities with comedy and domestic drama more than with heroic and classical tragedy (cited in Charry and Shahani, 2014: 109).

In *Omkaara*, the link with Shakespeare is apparently more explicit than it is in *Maqbool*. On the DVD cover, for example, the film is described as "[a] Vishal Bhardwaj's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*;" in the promotional material inside the DVD case, it is presented as "one of those rare instances of Shakespearean cinema that anyone can tune into and enjoy." The connection with the playwright is further underlined at the beginning of the movie, and it is emphasised in the trailer as well, which defines Bhardwaj's work as "[a] timeless tale of trust, seduction and betrayal," "based on William Shakespeare's *Othello*." *Omkaara* even adapts this Shakespearean tragedy more directly than *Maqbool* adapts *Macbeth*, at least on the surface. Due to the fact that *Maqbool* uses *Macbeth*'s basic plot and characters to create an original story, Heidenberg considers it to be more of an extended allusion to the original play than a

³⁶ A spectacular lyric dance drama characteristic of the south Indian state of Kerala.

faithful adaptation of it. By contrast, according to this scholar, *Omkara* is a scene-by-scene translation of *Othello* located in a new time and setting (2014: 87).

Othello becomes Omkara “Omi” Shukla, the right-hand man of Tiwari Bhaisaab (the Duke), a powerful Godfather-like politician involved in a close re-election battle after having been in jail. Desdemona is Dolly Mishra, the daughter of Bhaisaab’s lawyer, Ragonath Mishra, usually called “Vakil Saab” (Brabantio). Her family has arranged her marriage with Rajan “Rajju” Tiwari (Roderigo), but she falls in love with Omkara, who abducts her just before the wedding ceremony and brings her to his native village, where the couple is welcomed by its inhabitants and especially by Omi’s sister, Indu (Emilia). The issue of the abduction is brought to Bhaisaab, in front of whom Dolly admits she has eloped with Omkara on her own volition; she publicly shames her father, who subsequently warns the gangster to beware his daughter. Omkara’s henchmen are the urban-educated Keshav “Kesu” Upadhyay (Cassio) and the uncouth Ishwar “Langda” Tyagi (Iago). Langda is married to Omi’s sister and they have a little boy, eight-year-old Golu. When Bhaisaab announces live on TV that Omkara will take his place, Omi promotes Kesu (his second henchman) over Langda (his first henchman), regardless of the latter’s considerable expertise and of their family ties. Langda feels cheated and does not understand Omkara’s strategy, that is, trying to secure the votes of the college students as they already recognise Kesu as a leader. As Yadav clarifies, Omkara never bothers to explain his reasons to his lieutenants; on his part, Kesu perfectly fits the “gullible goon” that does not realise, nor even suspect, that both Omi and Langda are taking advantage of his ingenuity (2014: 50-51). After the humiliation he has received, Ishwar starts to plot his revenge: manipulating jealousy and misunderstanding pervade the whole movie, as much as in the original play. Along with Omkara and Dolly and Langda and Indu, another couple is given attention, that of Kesu and Billo Chamanbahar (Bianca), whose love story is by far more stable and sincere than the relationship between Cassio and Bianca. As I am going to underline in this chapter, different reasons suggest that *Omkara* cannot be considered a typical Bollywood film: among these, its new conception of music, its explicit love scenes, and the role of “avenger” performed by a woman (Indu) instead of a man (Omkara).

The location in Uttar Pradesh gives plenty of opportunities for action and violence, for instance when Omkara’s men confront the gang of Indore Singh, the political rival of the shadowy Bhaisaab they work for. Their fighting replaces the war against the Turks, a collision that never occurs in *Othello* because the Turkish fleet is

destroyed by a sea-storm before being able to reach the shores of Cyprus. Although both play and movie give greater prominence to the personal, domestic tragedy, in *Omkara* the gang rivalry appears to be sustained almost to the end, thus providing an all-round contextualisation to the characters' vicissitudes. Unlike Othello, Omkara does not serve the state; he rather helps hijack parliamentary elections in a nation-state that is represented as being violent, corrupt, and run by criminals. As Charry and Shahani stress, the Indian state is "dismissed as an obsolete and irrelevant political entity," and its institutions (parliament, state assembly, the police, and even the railways) are depicted "as either corrupt or as bumbling, ridiculous, and easily bullied or duped" (2014: 113). Some scenes are apparently very realistic and quite likely to happen in today's Uttar Pradesh. For example, it is not uncommon that a local politician in power demands to change the destination of the train for personal motives.

[On the train]

BHAISAAB (on the phone): Don't panic now! I'll be there soon.

(To Langda and Omkara) Auntyji's worried about my safety. The C.I.D. says that I might be attacked. She wants me to come to the capital for 2-3 days... till it tides over.

LANGDA: 2-3 days?!

(To Omkara) In the meantime, we can start fundraising by ourselves... right?

BHAISAAB: Sounds fine.

LANGDA: Then?

BHAISAAB: Pull the chain son.

(Langda pulls it. The train stops and the conductor arrives.)

TRAIN CONDUCTOR: Any problem Bhaisaab?

BHAISAAB: Reverse the train. These gentlemen have to be dropped back.

TRAIN CONDUCTOR: Sorry?

BHAISAAB: You heard me!

(1:05:28 – 1:06:46)³⁷

Beyond the various scene-by-scene similarities, some differences with the Shakespearean tragedy are also significant. Like in Jayaraj's *Kaliyattam* (1997), in which the white handkerchief spotted with strawberries that Othello gives Desdemona as his first present is substituted by a silk robe, Omkara gifts Dolly with a jewelled

³⁷ Throughout this dissertation, all the dialogues and expressions taken from Bhardwaj's *Omkara* correspond to the English subtitles of the subtitled version of the film available at: <<https://einthusan.tv/movie/watch/6913/?lang=hindi>>

cummerbund called *kamarbandh* or *kardhani*, specifying that it is his family's heirloom. According to Heidenberg, when Omkara explains to Dolly that such a waistband has "adorned the brides of this house down the ages," not only does he mean that the cummerbund has to embellish his wife, but also that Dolly herself is the latest in a series of home decorations. Moreover, as it is worn low on the hips, it represents "a symbol linking family honour, prosperity, and the continuation of the male-dominated line and name, and it places the bride-to-be in a necessary, but necessarily subordinate, role" (2014: 97). In the Indian tradition, the waistband is also a visible metonymy for chastity, while the handkerchief is no longer seen as a valued possession with sexual connotations as it was in Shakespeare's times. Unlike in the original play, however, the sexual consummation between the title character and his wife-to-be occurs before their formal wedding, since abduction itself counts as a sort of marriage. Another point of divergence in terms of issues of sexuality is that, while Iago suspects Othello of having slept with his wife, Langda's wife is Omkara's sister; therefore, in the film, Omi's only mistake is the choosing of Kesu as the new *bahubali*³⁸.

According to Milton, the major plot change takes place at the beginning of the movie, when Rajju would have married Dolly had not Langda hijacked his *baarat*³⁹ so as to let Omkara abduct the bride. In *Othello*, instead, Roderigo is only one of Desdemona's pretenders, and he is not even appreciated by her father (2014: 90). Furthermore, in the film, Rajju and Langda are real friends, and it is the former that encourages the latter to have his revenge on Omi.

RAJJU: And you, Brother sir Langda? Who are you to talk about nerve? What guts did you display when Omi publicly chose Kesu as his successor?

For the last 15 years, you've been faithfully serving that half caste on a leg and a half...

Hail Langda General! Hail General Langda!

That pretender Kesu comes out of nowhere and coolly snatches the bone out of your mouth. Where did your guts go walking then?! Company garden?

LANGDA: You know Rajju, you are finally making some sense. Both of us are damned to lead donkey's lives!

(0:44:46 – 0:45:58)

³⁸ Usually referred to a person with great strength and power, here it is used as a synonym for "general."

³⁹ The bridegroom's marriage procession.

Also Indu befriends Dolly and, unlike Emilia, does not serve her as a maid. In the first scenes together, the two women chat jokingly at the estate, then Indu soothes and consoles her in her most difficult moments.

[Indu goes to Dolly, who has not slept the entire night]

INDU: If you keep crying like this, you'll flood the whole village!

Oh! Missing you papa, are you? Sober up now dodo! I'll take care of you. I'll be your pa, ma, bro, sis... everything rolled into one... now stop crying!

(1:46:42 – 1:47:10)

From what viewers understand from Dolly's flashback (0:16:20 – 0:19:18)⁴⁰, Omkara's courtship includes neither any of the visits Othello pays to Brabantio's, nor any of the adventurous tales he tells Desdemona. Dolly rather falls in love with him after having healed one of his wounds at her home. Further elements, including Othello's alleged epilepsy and the *Willow Song* sung by Desdemona, are completely omitted; several details, instead, are added: among these, the already-mentioned contrasts between rival political gangs, including an MMS sex scandal, and an attempted assassination of the Duke-Bhaisaab.

Another considerable difference is the absence of a clear geographic split. While *Othello*'s first act is set in Venice and the rest of the tragedy takes place in Cyprus, in *Omkara* the setting shifts from town to village, but the passage is less defined. It can be marked by Dolly's arrival at Omi's village, even though the gangsters continue to be involved in political affairs in town. Also the hospital where Bhaisaab is admitted after having been shot by Kichlu is presumably in town. Therefore, unlike *Maqbool*, Bhardwaj does not choose the globalised metropolis as the backdrop of his adaptation, but he rebuilds a typical Uttar Pradeshi small town, recreating the dialect, colours, and flavour of the region he hails from. Madhava Prasad, in one of the first scholarly commentaries produced after *Omkara*'s screening, claims that the film's use of such a setting and its corresponding Hindi dialect are far more prominent than the film's connection with the original theatrical work (cited in Charry and Shahani, 2014: 114).

Though not being the dark Mumbai of Bhardwaj's first Shakespearean movie, the small-town location is not deprived of tensions: it is a murky, liminal space between the traditional village and the cosmopolitan city, between the so-called "eternal east"

⁴⁰ Throughout this dissertation, all the references to specific scenes in Bhardwaj's *Omkara* refer to the version of the film available at: <<https://einthusan.tv/movie/watch/6913/?lang=hindi>>

(meaning rural India) and the West, which is commonly seen as the cradle of colonialism, globalism, and Shakespeare as well. This liminality is proven by the juxtaposition of rootedness and transformation; as a matter of fact, traditional factors, like respect for the elders and subordination of women, coexist with changes in the conception of intercaste marriages for love (now seemingly conceivable) and with the use of mobile phones (almost everyone seems to have one). Throughout the film, these are used in decisive moments: at the very beginning, guests at Rajju's *baarat* are grabbed their mobile phones by Langda; a call from Bhaisaab prevents his lawyer from firing at Omkara, guilty of the abduction of his daughter. Cell phones constitute the means through which MMS with explicit sexual contents involving Indore Singh are spread; a phone call makes Bhaisaab have the train stopped, so that Omi and Langda can come back and, via another call, discover that Kesu has been to Dolly's in secret. After Bhaisaab's attempted assassination, Dolly rings Kesu up, so that he takes her to the hospital (in this regard, Langda says that the two are constantly in touch via phone); Kichlu enters the room in which Billo is performing *Namak* while speaking on the phone; on the same night, Dolly does not answer her husband's calls because her mobile phone is in silent mode. It is Babulal's phone call that interrupts Omkara's pre-wedding turmeric ritual; it is telephonically that also Billo is untruthfully said that Kesu is betraying her with another woman. Most importantly, it is via a call that Omi is convinced of his wife's dishonesty. In the middle of the night, Rajju rings Kesu up to inform him that Billo is at Langda's in a foul mood. The youngster immediately phones Langda, who, meanwhile, is walking with a hungry-for-truth Omkara. Kesu tells him about his complicated affair with the dancer, but Langda makes Omi believe that he is talking of Dolly, even turning the speakerphone on in the most ambiguous moment of the conversation (Charry and Shahani, 2014: 115).

KESU: This 'love affair' is a bloody bore! The 'wham bang' days were much better! If she's so turned on before the wedding, imagine how she'll devour me after? I told her we should avoid doing it on the wedding night... but no luck!

(2:10:24 – 2:10:50)

Apart from cell phones (and the camera that Langda uses at his son's birthday party), the only other touch of modernity is to be found in Kesu, in whose figure modernity becomes a synonym for "English education and urbanity" (Dutta, 2013: 40-41). Local flavour, instead, is preserved in all the purification rituals surrounding Dolly and Omi's Hindu marriage. Colour powders recalling the traditional "Holi" spring

festival are shot in the air when Kesu is appointed as the new general (Chaudhury, 2016: 533).

Unlike *Maqbool*, there is no allusion to any religious conflicts: though being criminals, all characters are Hindu, and Hindu symbols and iconography are used throughout the film. The characters' names are transcribed as Hindu names and distinctly Brahmin surnames, nonetheless maintaining the initial Shakespearean sound letter. These names have also a metaphysical resonance, as they recall Hindu deities' names with whom Indians feel a certain identity connection. For instance, "Omkaara" refers to the sacred letter "OM," associated with writing, knowledge, and sacred rituals. The theme song, *Omkaara*, also commented later in this analysis, is a war anthem that makes reference not only to the title character as being the greatest warrior, but also to the iconography of Rudra, an ancient Vedic deity then probably evolved in the major Hindu god of destruction, Shiva (Pandit Hogan, 2010: 50-55).

Whilst in *Maqbool* the police are in collusion with the underworld, whose leaders also handle Bollywood affairs, in *Omkaara* the gangland manipulate the electoral system and commit political crimes. The director's choice puts to the foreground Indian endemic corruption, which subsequently garnered considerable public attention in 2011-2012 thanks to the anti-corruption movement led by social activist Anna Hazare (Chambers, 2016: 17). Shahani and Charry attribute the power of the criminal mob to fraternity and to men's relations with men. The gang leader, whose actual name is Tiwari, is commonly referred to as "Bhaisaab," which means "Respected Brother." He is feared by his henchmen, but he is not perceived strictly as a "father" like Jahangir-Abbaji in *Maqbool*: the functioning of the group is rather based on the rhetoric of brotherhood, thus on being "one among equals." For instance, when Kesu is promoted, Omkaara reassures Tiwari that Langda will not be envious, saying: "He's like a brother. He'll understand." This should testify to the fact that the brotherly feeling has to transcend personal ambition, because "the gang is always bigger than the individuals who make it up" (2014: 173). The gang warfare, which, as previously noted, has a far different relevance if compared with the never-occurring war against the Ottoman Empire in *Othello*, is useful to reinforce the idea of the characters (particularly Langda and Omkaara) "as fellow warriors fighting shoulder to shoulder in battle." Their intimacy is further intensified by the planning of Dolly's death: as a result of the antagonism they face together, Langda convinces Omkaara of Dolly's infidelity shortly after having successfully defeated the rival Singh (Shahani and Charry, 2014: 174). While in the

tragedy Othello stands alone, in Bhardwaj's movie he is thus given a full household (George, 2016: 205). At the end of the film, however, Omkara, and Rajju too, realise the falsehood behind Langda's fantasy of male friendship. Paradoxically, their downfall results from both having subscribed to the fraternal bond by too easily believing in Langda's insinuations, and from having betrayed the same bond by starting to see Kesu as an enemy (Shahani and Charry, 2014: 175).

As far as sources are concerned, *Omkara* recalls the tradition of Indo-Westerns (generally known as "Curry Westerns") like Sippy's *Sholay* (1975), also set in a small Indian town. The director seems to be a fan of "Spaghetti Westerns" too, so much so that Omi is frequently shot riding a horse and walking around a barren landscape wearing a poncho that reminds the audience of the Man with No Name of Sergio Leone's "Dollars Trilogy" (Yadav, 2014: 52). Chaudhury quotes Chakravorty:

The cinematography is spectacular, as the camera zooms in and out of the earth tones of mud homes and thatched cottages to the craggy exteriors and rocky plains. At times it is reminiscent of old westerns with its vast muddied terrains and drunken revelries, but here it is an authentic Indian wildwest. (2016: 533)

Choreographed performances, instead, are linked to the music and dance spectacles of the Bollywood screen vamp of the 1970s, here embodied by Billo. At the same time, *Omkara* appears to be in congruence with Baz Luhrman and Peter Greenway's style, which allegedly conceives Shakespeare's text and its staging "as a literary, auditory, and visual archive ripe for reinvigoration" (Charry and Shahani, 2014: 112).

In terms of language, if compared to the majority of Bollywood films, *Omkara* contains a vast number of expletives in Khariboli, coming especially from Langda. According to Milton, this might have caused a relative lack of success in conservative India, especially if contrasted with the UK (2014: 93). The word "Khariboli" literally means "stiff (Khari) speak (boli)" and carries connotations of rustic and unrefined dialect (Gusain, 2013: 112). As reported by Sen, Bhardwaj himself, native of the region, recorded various speeches for the actors, in particular for Saif Ali Khan, the interpreter of Langda, so that the cast could reproduce the correct parlance of the land (2010: 238).

4.1.1 Bollywood conventions: songs, dances and marriage rituals

When Western audiences think of Bollywood, the first image that crosses their minds is of elaborately choreographed singing and dancing performances. These numbers

typically fulfil two major functions: first, they allow characters who are in love but separated to express their feelings through lyrical contents and physical gestures in a socially acceptable way; second, they transport both characters and viewers in fantastical realms outside the main action of the movie. Like in *Maqbool*, also in *Omkara* the music interludes, though not always diegetic, are integral to the storyline and do not entail any change either in location or costume. The song sequences are rather realistic and provide the film with narrative continuity (Heidenberg, 2014: 89). The two principal music interludes in the adaptation are performed by Billo/Bianca, who is not a prostitute like in Shakespeare but a local dancer: though not in the number of the average Bollywood movies, her dance sequences are meticulously choreographed (Sen, 2010: 238).

The first number performed by Billo is a song called *Beedi* (“Cigarette”). Its staging on the occasion of the defeat of Indore Singh’s gang is comparable with the general celebrations ordered by Othello in Cyprus after the Turkish fleet is destroyed by a sea-storm. In *Omkara* the song is explicitly requested by an all-male audience. Billo performs it with strong sexual connotations, partly on stage and partly among her spectators, and both Kesu and Langda are involved in the dance and sing some lines too. The refrain is translated as “Light your fag from the heat in my bosom;” “bosom” is made the translation of “jigar,” which, in Hindi, literally means “liver.” As Chambers clarifies, though it seems unromantic, the phrase “heat of my liver” has unexpected connotations of burning desire; in effect, in Hindi, love is not said to originate in the heart but in the liver, thus testifying to the perception of different organs in different cultures as the seat of passion (2016: 22).

According to Pandit Hogan, Billo represents a “woman with agency” who, though not being a proper prostitute, follows the character prototype of the career courtesan. Not only is this prototype the focus of a celebrated micro genre widely employed in Indian movies, it has also been developed as a major Bollywood genre in itself, especially thanks to internationally known films like *Pakeezah* (1972) and *Umrao Jaan* (1981). Billo sings and moves provocatively, and her Dionysian sexuality contrasts with Dolly’s Apollonian private sensuality and dream of marriage (2010: 49-50). Bipasha Basu, the actress who interprets the dancer, defines her as “the hottie of the village;” hence, together with Dolly, this character reproduces the dramatic opposition chaste/unchaste already expressed by Shakespeare’s Desdemona and Bianca. In some ways, Billo also seems to be an updated version of the “vamp,” a key figure in Hindi

films from the 1950s to the 1970s frequently played by the Anglo-Indian actress Helen Khan. The vamp, who like the courtesan is not a real prostitute, is usually a vaguely Western-looking dancer in Western clothes, who performs before a male public and gives the impression of not being “chaste.” Billo sings to Indo-Western beats and, despite not being traditional in her gyrating and cheeky moves, she appears very Indian: “the earthy, dusky-skinned femme fatale of the small town.” Charry and Shahani continue her portrayal by attributing to her a series of descriptive adjectives: “[s]elf-conscious and defiantly gaudy, outrageous, loud, cocky, sexy, young, unsure of herself but also very self-assured, and very, very certain of the adulation of her audience.” Apparently indifferent to social disapproval, she is able to make a place for herself in a town dominated by tradition. The critics even come to affirm that Billo exemplifies the spirit of both Bollywood performance and cinema, to the point of becoming “the symbolic projection of the film’s awareness not only of its own status as Shakespearean adaptation, but quite simply as a work of art and entertainment” (2014: 119).



Figure 16

Towards the end of Billo’s *Beedi*, a scuffle between a drunken Kesu and Rajju breaks out, because the latter refuses to extinguish a cigarette whose smoke is making the dancer cough. The intervention of another man makes Kesu totally lose control: had it not been for Omi’s timely arrival alerted by Rajju’s shouting, the youngster would have probably killed the improvised peacemaker. This is the brawl that causes Kesu to be temporarily deprived of his newly acquired rank of *bahubali*. Langda takes part in the incident by initially instructing Rajju on how to behave during the performance and by provoking Kesu into drinking booze even if he has confessed that he has a low threshold for alcohol (0:53:50 – 1:20:00).

The second of Billo’s dance routines is organised to entrap Kichlu, who, in a murder attempt, has wounded Bhaisaab and sent him to the hospital. The once-again all-male members of the audience are disguised as policemen, including Omkara and Langda, who, after a gun battle, finally capture and kill the imposter. The song is

entitled *Namak* and is translated as “Spice.” In terms of storyline, the most important thing is that, while performing, Billo is wearing Dolly’s cummerbund. Langda, who has previously told Omkara that Kesu has slept with his fiancée, sees the waistband and subsequently, when at night the gang is reunited around a fire, makes fun of Kesu and Billo by also mentioning the sparkling jewel he has glimpsed on her hips, thus increasing Omi’s inner torment (1:33:15 – 1:38:10).



Figure 17

Other songs, associated with some crucial moments of *Omkara*’s plot, build up the movie soundtrack. Analysing them in chronological order, the first one is *Naina* (“Eyes”), the background piece of music of Dolly and Omkara’s romance. After having admitted before Bhaisaab and her father that she eloped with the gangster on her own volition, the woman recounts how they fell in love. While she narrates, non-diegetic music and images revive all her memories, from the moment when Omkara knocked wounded at her doorstep, to her engagement ceremony with Rajju, until the love letter she wrote to Omi and gave Kesu at college (0:16:15 – 0:19:10). Also the theme song, *Omkara*, is non-diegetic. It is not performed by anyone of the characters, but rather constitutes the background music of a fight between Omkara’s gang and Captain’s men (0:25:50 – 0:28:50). Surendra Captain is the gangster through whom Omkara has to negotiate a deal with Indore Singh in view of the forthcoming elections; these negotiations also entail an MMS sex scandal. Before having reached an agreement, Captain insults Omkara by saying that he has bet one-hundred rupees on the gangster’s discarding of Dolly after having “enjoyed” her for a little. Kesu and Langda try to restrain their leader, but he sees no reasons: he walks slowly to a handpump, where an old lady is filling a bucket with water. In this moment, background music starts to be heard. After having helped the elder, Omi puts the container on her head and orders her to return to the village to say that Captain has lost his bet. He then strides towards Captain and attacks him. The two gangs pounce on each other; their movements seem to be choreographed with music, whose lyrics are heroic and whose rhythm is beaten out by Langda shooting at a distance with his rifle (Verma, 2012: 93-94). The song

precisely describes Omkara's presumed ferocity via specific animal imagery: his eyes are like "sharpening steel" and his tongue is like "a snake's hiss"⁴¹. His beast-like fierceness is what, according to Gusain, makes him an effective warrior in his society (2013: 114-115).

A rare case in Bollywood movies is the scene where Kesu, gone to Dolly's to ask her to intercede on his behalf with Omkara, makes a deal with her and teaches her Stevie Wonder's *I just called to say I love you*. The original thing is that both music and lyrics are not in playback but are performed by the actors themselves. Kesu plays the guitar quite imperfectly, while Dolly is not able to imitate the American pronunciation of "bottom": this makes the scene comic and realistic at the same time (1:07:22 – 1:08:40). When Kesu sees Omi's car coming back unexpectedly, he flees by bike; Omi, who has spotted him, reaches Dolly and asks her why the youngster was there; Dolly, instead of answering, begins to play the guitar and sing the song she has just learnt (1:10:54 – 1:11:50). Hearing such an unstudied performance, Omkara forgets momentarily about his suspicion and bursts out laughing. Pretending to be insulted by his words ("You're either one hell of a fool... or one hell of a witch"), Dolly starts chasing her fiancé around the compound throwing things at him. At this point, another highly romantic song, *O Saathi Re* ("O my love"), begins to be played in the background. It is during this non-diegetic musical interlude that Dolly loses her cummerbund. Such a song ends with a tender love-making scene that is immediately followed by a more voracious one between Indu and Langda (1:12:35 – 1:16:50). At one particular moment during the *O Saathi Re* interlude, Dolly grabs a seemingly heavy rifle and points it at Omi, who is lying prone on the ground. The shotgun appears to be too big for her to wield it easily, thus making the scene light-hearted and playful. While the audience have already seen various sequences in which the characters are armed with guns and fire at rivals, they perceive no danger in Dolly's gunplay. The action is not quick but it rather matches the slow pace of the love song and its dreamy quality. According to Heidenberg, though any potential threat is negated by the sweetness of the singing, Dolly, by brandishing the weapon, nonetheless asserts a temporary mastery over the most powerful male character in the movie (2014: 90).

⁴¹ I reported the English translation of the original Hindi lyrics taken from: <<https://www.filmlyquotes.com/songs/883>>



Figure 18

The last song in the film is *Jag Ja* (“Wake up”), which is played on two different occasions. The first time, it is sung by Omkara without any musical accompaniment in order to wake Dolly up after the night spent together (1:19:12 – 1:20:32). The second time, it is played after Dolly’s murder. Omi, who has just learnt that Langda made up the whole affair between Kesu and his wife, is lying next to her dead body. He is desperate and would like it to be possible to wake her up again. He murmurs the lyrics, while the recorded, non-diegetic lullaby resounds in the background (2:24:20 – 2:26:28).



Figure 19

As stated in the chapter dedicated to *Maqbool*, another common convention of Hindi cinema is constituted by marriages, usually functioning as micro genres. Whilst in *Othello* the two main characters have already got married when the theatrical work begins, and only references to the newlyweds’ interrupted first night in Cyprus are made, *Omkara* begins with a failed union. Rajju and Dolly’s marriage, in fact, never takes place because its preparations are stopped by the groom comically arriving at the wedding location on a moped to announce that Omkara has abducted his bride. The welcoming banner “Rajan weds Dolly” has a dangling “D,” thus almost testifying to the negative outcome of the forthcoming ceremony. In Dolly’s subsequent flashback, the audience are also shown parts of their engagement ceremony, which has been held according to the typical Hindu rituals. Omkara and Dolly’s marriage, which instead is celebrated towards the end of the movie, is given more attention, and its ceremonial is made to begin when Dolly calls the priest to know when the auspicious time for the wedding is. After having established the date, pre-wedding rituals follow: these include

the *mehndi* rite⁴² and the *haldi* or turmeric ceremony, which consists in family members applying yellow turmeric paste mixed with sandalwood, milk and rose on the bride's and groom's faces, necks, arms and feet, so as to brighten their skin colour and protect them from all kinds of food. This paste is also believed to safeguard the couple from the evil's eyes and to alleviate their potential nervousness. In the film, the opposite effect is nonetheless produced, because, in the case of Omkara, he leaves the ritual before its ending to answer a phone call; in the case of Dolly, an eagle in the sky makes a snake fall in the pot full of turmeric, which thus splashes on her face. Hence, on both occasions, the outcome is perceived as inauspicious. Though not in a favourable, joyous climate, the proper marriage is finally held according to the traditional Vedic ceremony. In this regard, Pandit Hogan explains how in Indian culture bride and groom symbolise a god and a goddess, Shiva and Parvati. In *Omkara*, however, the subsequent death of the couple, still in their ceremony costumes, puts an end to this sacred time and to the importance of religious myth in Hindu life (2010: 52).

4.2 The characters

4.2.1 Indu and Langda face to face with their family's *izzat*

In Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara*, the two chief agents, who attempt to destroy and preserve their family's *izzat* ("honour"), are respectively Langda and Indu, Iago's and Emilia's counterparts. If compared with the Shakespearean character, Indu is a much more empowered female personality. She is earthy but spirited, and she embodies the same intelligence and resilience shown by Desdemona's ripostes in the original play (Sen, 2010: 237). In *Omkara*, Indu is reimagined as an ordinary woman who, unlike Emilia, is also Othello-Omkara's sister and eight-year-old Golu's mother. In her role of wife, sister, sister-in-law, and mother, she is able to influence actively all the other main characters. Heidenberg maintains that this deviation from Shakespeare's tragedy strengthens the relationships between the two couples, thus building the storyline on the idea of family. The critic adds that Indu is perhaps the central, though unacknowledged, character of the movie and, as such, she represents a woman that rebels against the traditional female roles (cited in Dionne and Kapadia, 2014: 13). In her function of protector of the family's *izzat*, she is presented as a modern-day version of the Indian cinematic trope of the self-sacrificing mother, traditionally epitomised by Radha in

⁴² See note 21.

Mehboob Khan's Hindi film *Mother India* (1957). Such a mother figure, usually passive and nurturing, is pure in her "Indianness," but she becomes more active and even vengeful if her family's or village's honour are threatened (Heidenberg, 2014: 88-92).

Making a parallel with Hindu mythology, Indu takes on aspects of Parvati, who is Shiva's wife and Krishna's sister. Parvati represents good fortune, prosperity and nurture; Durga, her darker side, is instead ruthless and destructive, symbolises misfortune, but is also seen as a protector of families and a slayer of demons. Like Parvati, Indu welcomes and soothes both Dolly and Kesu; like Durga, she is able to avenge the death of those she cares for. As a matter of fact, after Dolly has come to the village, Indu humorously teases her brother, thus intervening publicly to defuse the potential scandal that could undermine the stability of her family. When Kesu loses his newly-acquired title of *bahubali* for having caused a brawl, she cooks *chapatti*⁴³ for him, consoles him, and also encourages him to smile. After having discovered Langda's cruel deception and Omkara's impious murder, however, she first rages against her brother, then kills her husband herself. Hence, when both the men of her family betray their responsibility to maintain their *izzat* by either causing or committing a series of despicable crimes, she acts to protect at least the reputation of her son (Heidenberg, 2014: 88-89). Internalising anger and grief, but also guilt for having stolen Dolly's cummerbund, in her revenge she takes on the appearance of the avenging goddess Kali, the deity that destroys evil (Pandit Hogan, 2010: 18).

Irreverent and outspoken, Indu holds a dominant position in the village, where she does not veil herself under *parda* and is not silent at all, rather expressing freely among her fellow villagers. Dolly, instead, being outside her native town, respects the traditional rules more strictly: she veils herself, she laughs hiding her mouth, and she keeps silent most of the time. Owing to the fact that Langda and Omkara are often involved in political mafia's affairs away from the village, Indu can be perceived as the real representative of her family. She never ventures in town and always wears traditional Indian clothes, thus remaining among the people she has known all her life and embodying the traditional Indian values. Heidenberg avers that, when Dolly and Omkara arrive at the village, Indu plays two key roles. First, she welcomes Dolly publicly, so as to make her feel protected by the most powerful family in the community; second, she teases her brother to avert any possible criticism of a couple in which the groom embodies the "love thief" (2014: 93). Furthermore, as Gupta remarks,

⁴³ Typical Indian bread.

she wants to prevent that “the man who marries for love” loses his *izzat*, is kicked away, and hence becomes “utterly worthless.” For this reason, Indu focuses on Dolly’s fairness by linking her white skin to the justness of the match. In effect, she seems to persuade indirectly her people that the wedding between the two will be advantageous and will even increase her brother’s honour (cited in Heidenberg, 2014: 93-94).

Indu’s relationship with her sister-in-law is abiding, certainly more than the ties among men, which are permeated by conflicts due to ambition and self-interests. However, when she finds Dolly’s cummerbund and does not give it back, she challenges the subordinate aspect of her female status. The scene is different from that in which Emilia steals Desdemona’s handkerchief because, while Iago’s wife has no knowledge of its significance and does not even know what her husband wants to do with it, Indu, being Omkara’s sister, must necessarily have knowledge of the importance of that “jewel,” which in fact is a family heirloom that certainly belonged to her mother too. By wearing it and showing it to Langda, she probably aims to transfer the cummerbund’s *izzat* from her birth family to her nuclear family, thus overturning the patrilineal order (Heidenberg, 2014: 97).

In the movie, Indu makes various allusions to the relationships between men and women. During a confidential conversation with Dolly, soon after her arrival at the village, she says:

[Dolly is cooking on the patio]

INDU: Not bad at all! That smells good! You turned out to be quite some cook...

What’s the secret?

DOLLY: My grandma’s formula... She told me that the way to a man’s heart is through his belly.

INDU: What bull! My grandma always told me to aim a bit lower.

(0:39:44 – 0:40:10)

Food is recalled also in a later dialogue between the two women, after Indu finds out that Dolly has not slept the entire night and has been hit by her husband – out of love, she lies.

INDU: I’ll tell you a little secret. My grandma always told me to keep these men slightly hungry. Else the day they get satisfied, they’ll puke you out like nobody’s business! Got that?

(1:47:40 – 1:48:08)

The woman's words echo Emilia's lines in act 3.4:

'Tis not a year or two shows us a man
They are all but stomachs, and we all but food.
To eat us hungerly, and when they are full,
They belch us. Look you, Cassio and my husband!
(3.4.92-95)

A further reference to food is made after the unfortunate outcome of Dolly's *haldi* ritual, when Indu is trying to console the desperately weeping bride.

INDU: Men and women have always had a pan and ladle equation. Alone, they stay miserable... and together, they make one helluva racket!
INDU and LANGDA: Cling Clang Cling Clang!
(2:02:28 – 2:02:45)

Immediately afterwards, she goes talking to her brother, to whom she delivers a stirring speech. Railing against the injustice of women's condition, she underlines how the scriptures have depicted women as temptresses and adulterous.

INDU: When the scriptures themselves have sullied women, who can blame mere mortals like you, brother? We renounce our homes and walk into your lives with bare empty hands. But even after the holy fires approve us, we're regarded disloyal sooner than loyal.
(2:04:58 – 2:05:34)

In a certain sense, her words soften Emilia's "proto-feminist" speech in act 4.3.82-102, where she expresses the view that also women could betray their unfaithful husbands (Milton, 2014: 91).

Throughout the movie, Indu is thereby created as both a modern figure (in her subversion of male-female roles) and as a traditional representative of "Indianness" (in her defence of family's honour). By contrast, Dolly appears to have very little agency, so much so that, at the beginning of the film, she tells her father that her falling in love with Omkara was something over which she had almost no choice. Chambers underpins that she "depicts herself as unintentionally losing her heart to Omi, adding to his 'list of slain,' and making him the warrior and possessor and she the conquered and the possession." Dolly's unique flash of agency is her initial consideration of suicide, then dismissed as pointless (2016: 21).

In her leading role, Indu can be perceived as the competitor of Langda, her husband. As in the film she is Omkara's sister, the Iago character is a member of the gangster's family. His also being Omi's first henchman would make of him his rightful heir. In fact, when the young Kesu is chosen in his place, he neither understands Omi's political tactic nor asks him why. This outrage, instead, spurs him to take his revenge (Chaudhury, 2016: 532).

To be more precise, after having heard on the TV news that Bhaisaab, just come out of prison and determined to compete for a seat in the Parliament, has appointed Omkara as the new leader of the party, Rajju immediately runs searching for Langda: he is convinced that Langda will be upgraded as the new general. After having woken him up, Rajju kisses his feet, makes him wear his sunglasses, and starts jumping around him screaming, "Langda, *Bahubali!*". Langda reacts by broadening into a smile which conveys all his career expectations (Yadav, 2014: 51). Whilst in Shakespeare spectators are not necessarily compelled to think that Othello's promotion of Cassio is a kind of injustice towards Iago, in *Omkara*, where the story begins much earlier in time, Omi's choice of Kesu is not referred just in conversation, but the entire ceremony is openly shown, thus creating certain expectations in viewers as well. During a suggestive ritual, Omkara hands Langda the ceremonial plate containing the red paint used to anoint the new general, so that it seems that he wants to proclaim him as *bahubali*. In reality, he only has Langda to support it while he turns to Kesu and upgrades him. Omi's unexpected choice is followed by a shot of Langda's disappointed face and sad smile. In the following scene, Langda, alone in his poorly-lit bathroom, crowns himself with his own blood after having broken the mirror with a punch. Various scholars, including Sultana (2014), attribute to these two subsequent episodes the purpose of presenting a more sympathetic Iago. According to Yadav, he is made a "lovable villain" in spite of his unkempt looks and jarring language" (2014, 50-51), "a character with whom the audience can relate" (George, 2016: 206).

Thinking that Kesu does not deserve what he has gained (as Iago thinks that Cassio has no real battle experience), Langda soon makes up a love affair between the new *bahubali* and Omi's fiancée. Hence, playing on Dolly's supposed treachery by also holding onto what her father told Omkara,

General... may you never forget the two faced monster a woman can be! She who can dupe her own father, will never be anyone's to claim.

(0:20:30 – 0:20:54)

he starts to manipulate events meticulously. He engineers first to have Kesu dismissed, then to avenge himself upon Omkara for the alleged slight he has received (Sultana, 2014).

According to George, another reason why the audience tend to sympathise with Langda is Kesu's charismatic but soft personality. As a matter of fact, while Cassio is generally considered to be a courageous man, Kesu is perceived more as a charming youngster than a real fighter, and he is undoubtedly less capable than Langda. Moreover, whilst in *Othello* Iago schemes every move, thus functioning as a catalyst for the events, in *Omkara* Langda appears as a villain that takes advantage of the way events unfold. For instance, he does not ask his wife to steal Dolly's cummerbund; she rather finds it by accident, keeps it, and wears it because she wants to. Hence, her husband only exploits the "favourable" situation: he takes possession of the waistband and donates it to Kesu so that he can gift Billo with it. In addition to this, in the Shakespearean tragedy Iago manipulates Roderigo and uses his ingenuity only for his purposes, whereas in the film there seems to be a true friendship between Langda and Rajju (2016: 207).

In terms of friendship, Langda plays the role of the concerned friend also with Kesu and Omi. On the one hand, he persuades Kesu to appeal to Dolly in order to be forgiven, as she is the only person able to mollify Omkara; on the other, he discredits Dolly in front of Omkara by implicating an illicit love affair between the woman and the youngster. The majority of the dialogues in which Iago persuades Othello of Desdemona's infidelity are missing, and none of his soliloquies is retained. Some of Langda's insinuations, instead, are very similar to the Shakespearean ones, and are reported almost verbatim.

OMKARA: Wasn't that Kesu?

LANGDA: Kesu? Leave the poor boy alone now. Why in the world would he come to see Dolly in your absence?

OMKARA: But it did look like his bike.

LANGDA: Come on bro, Kesu's our own. Why would he run like a thief on seeing us?

(1:09:02 – 1:09:30)

OTHELLO: Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?

IAGO: Cassio, my lord? No, sure, I cannot think it

That he would steal away so guilty-like
Seeing you coming.
OTHELLO: I do believe 'twas he.
(3.3.37–40)

Naman Ramachandran, cited in Milton, praises Saif Ali Khan for his brilliant interpretation of Langda: “The limping Khan, with shorn tresses, yellowed teeth and resolutely non-designer stubble, inhabits the part completely, spitting venom and chewing any available scenery” (2014: 88). Yadav describes the character as “a sharpshooter – smart, ruthless and power-hungry,” “a rustic goon with a wonderful sense of humour” (2014: 50). The director himself confesses that he has made him smarter than Iago: while in Shakespeare’s tragedy Othello seems to be too dumb and credulous, Omkara tends to always double-check what Langda insinuates; as a consequence, the villain-character must possess all the necessary skills to counter these situations (cited in Sen, 2010: 235).

Langda’s real name is Ishwar Tyagi. In spite of the fact that “Ishwar” means “god” in the sense of “supreme controller,” he is never called as such in the film (Gusain, 2013: 115). He is rather renamed “Langda,” which means “lame,” owing to his prominent limp, his most evident physical characteristic; even his wife describes him as having “half a leg.” While Omkara is comparable with Krishna, he could be linked to Shiva, one avatars of whom, Sani, walks with a limp. “Sani” literally means “the slow-moving one;” moreover, this god is associated with bad luck and is alleged to oversee “the dungeons of the human heart and the dangers that lurk there.” Another association with Shiva lies in the fact that the deity is often portrayed while wearing a tiger skin or sitting on it as a trophy from an earlier battle. In the movie, after the fight scene with Captain’s gang, Omkara addresses Kichlu, the only survivor, and says: “Next time round, bet on horses... not tigers,” thus defining himself as such an animal. Langda eventually manages to master Omi’s actions, so that he may be said to have metaphorically defeated a tiger (Heidenberg, 2014: 95).

The difference between Shiva and Langda is that, whilst the god has control over lust, Langda is a lustful creature, as the audience can witness in an uncharacteristically erotic scene involving the Indian Iago and his wife. As they lie in bed in an after-sex moment, a sweaty Indu both praises and teases his carnality.

INDU: There’s an animal caged inside you! Ravenous!
LANGDA: Ravenous what... Cheetah?

INDU: No...

LANGDA: Wolf? (Indu shakes her head) Serpent? (Indu shakes her head again)
Chameleon?

INDU (laughing): Nope... You are my bunny rabbit!

What would you like for dinner?

LANGDA: I'd like to drink some blood.

(1:18:00 – 1:19:06)

By mentioning a wild cat, a wolf, a snake, and a chameleon, the gangster tends to associate himself with predatory creatures that, before striking, observe their preys to find their weaknesses. On the contrary, by exclaiming that he is like a bunny, Indu undercuts his authority and strengthens his sexual insecurity: first, she places herself in a dominant position; second, she challenges his claims to power, both political and sexual. Finally, by choosing an animal notably known for its rampant and uncontrolled procreative urges, she denies his self-control, thus perceiving him as a slave to his passions, not a master of them (Heidenberg, 2014: 96).

The gangster's allusion to a serpent testifies to a further animal association that connects him with Shiva and snakes. In effect, in Hindu tradition this god is often depicted as wearing cobras around his neck, thus showing his complete authority over animals and their behaviour. In Bhardwaj's movie, not only does Langda seek to control everyone and everything surrounding him like Shiva, but, during Dolly's and Omkara's pre-wedding rituals (already messed up by his intervention), a serpent appears as an alleged ill omen (from a note in Heidenberg, 2014: 103). Yadav highlights that even in song sequences Langda moves "like a hooded cobra ready to strike" (2014: 51).

In addition to these juxtapositions, Langda's having "half a leg" links him to another of Shakespeare's villains, the "sinister hunchbacked" Richard III (Chambers, 2016: 18), a "master of improvisational deception" (from a note in Heidenberg, 2014: 102).

Deformed, unfinish'd, sent before my time
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them.
(*Richard III*, 1.1.20-23)

Bhardwaj's choice of making Langda limp seems not to be coincidental, as both characters rise to power via manipulation and elimination of presumed enemies within their natural and mob families. Furthermore, both Richard III and Iago-Langda can be said to adopt the tempter's role, usually embodied by the Vice figure in Medieval morality plays (Thompson, 2016: 7-10).

From a cinematographic point of view, Langda frequently appears in high-angle shots. These shots are generally used in key scenes of socio-political violence, where he stands above the others with a gun in his hand. Such moments contrast with those in which he is quietly insinuating: medium shots of Langda and Omkara "seated close to each other, like close friends in conference, their faces in profile, either half or quarter face to the camera, constituting nuances of doubt and faith as these two weave the fate of others" (Pandit Hogan, 2010: 56-57). After the killing of Indore Singh, the Iago-character appears to be physically overpowered by Omkara: asked repeatedly to answer a clear-cut "yes or no" to the question concerning the truthfulness of Kesu and Dolly's affair, he is beaten among the train tracks and threatened with the gangster's gun in the mouth. A general impression of coldness and bleakness is conveyed by the full shots of their rain-soaked bodies. Langda finally responds by using verbal equivocation, confirming his lie with an unafraid look (Pandit Hogan, 2010: 57).

On other occasions, Langda is shot in the form of a silhouette, showing three quarter of his face and body to the camera. At the very beginning of the film, he warns Rajju that Omkara has abducted his bride: he appears dark, menacing, but playful at the same time. After his friend has rushed to save his wedding, Langda stands up and approaches the top of the rock on which they were seated. The camera frames him from the back, following the limping movements of his feet, then from below, from where the bus directed to the wedding ceremony has been stopped. Finally, his silhouette is shot at sunset, alone on the rock. He raises his rifle, thus seeming to dominate the entire valley. The different angles of the camera, the beating background music that accompanies his steps, and the sentence he shouts, "The marriage party's stopping here!," already make viewers think about his prospective role in the movie. A similar moment from a cinematographic viewpoint is when, adding insult to injury, he is made to announce to the crowd that Kesu has been appointed as the new *bahubali*. Once again, he is shot from the back while standing on a rock above the valley, with his sacred thread in the foreground. This time, the focus of the camera is not on his feet but on his head and shoulders; he does not raise a rifle, but first he raises both arms to the sky, then he

lowers the left one, and keeps the other up. Langda is on an above-wall even while Omkara is duelling with Captain: the villain, who appears as an active agent of violence, is the one that shoots from a distance (Pandit Hogan, 2010: 57).

This character's extraordinary complexity is confirmed at the end of the movie, when, unlike the tight-lipped Iago, he claims that he is unsure about what is right and what is wrong. In this way, he shows an inkling of regret for those actions that he now sees as evil (George, 2016: 208).

LANGDA: Think what you must. My truth and my lies have all got blurred. Go shoot me in the head! Release me!

OMKARA: Death will only help free your body... but our souls are forever damned. We won't find redemption... not in this life!

(2:22:06 – 2:23:06)

4.2.2 Outsiders: the “Dark Lord” and the “Firangi”

Shakespeare's “Moor of Venice” has made critics debate about the representation of the title character for the last two centuries. As Thompson highlights, though in the early modern period “Moor” was an elastic term “that could encompass Muslims (i.e., a religious group), Africans (i.e., a geographical group), blacks (i.e., a racial group), atheists (i.e., a non-religious group) and others” (2016: 25), “it was not until the early 19th century that Othello's blackness was questioned by scholars and actors” (2016: 29). The tragedy itself contains internal suggestions of his portrayal as a black man. Most of this racialised rhetoric comes from Roderigo, Iago and Brabantio before Othello's appearance on stage. Roderigo calls him “thick lips” (1.1.65), Iago refers to him as both “an old black ram” (1.1.87) and “black Othello” (2.3.29); Brabantio affirms that he has a “sooty bosom” (1.2.70), while the Duke praises him as being “far more fair than black” (1.3.291). Othello himself wonders if Desdemona has been unfaithful to him because of his blackness (3.3.267-9) and, by contrast, accuses her virtue of having become as “begrimed and black” as his own face (3.3.389-91). Despite his military and political skills, in the white Venetian society he is thus made an inferior (George, 2016: 206).

In *Omkara*, it could be said simplistically that race is substituted by caste, as the Indian caste system is peculiar and caste-based demagoguery still has a crucial role in the local politics of today's Uttar Pradesh where the film is set. Things, however, are far more complicated and, though in the end the jealousy of love, connected with distrust,

betrayal, and revenge, remains the main focus of the film's happenings, both race and caste are somehow investigated (Sen, 2010: 234).

In terms of race, when Dolly is introduced to Omkara's household and fellow villagers, his sister Indu irreverently teases him about his darkness, which contrasts with his fiancée's stunning fairness: her complexion is incredibly fair, which, according to northern Indian conventions, is a distinct sign of beauty (Sen, 2010: 235). Omkara, instead, is by far the darkest-skinned character in the whole movie, a characteristic that, traditionally, would make him less desirable and also lower in status (Heidenberg, 2014: 94).

INDU (towards Dolly): Not bad at all! May you be protected from all evil...

Talk about a match made in heaven... like milk in a pot of coal.

(Everyone laughs and Omkara starts chasing after his sister)

INDU: Sorry Omi bro! My tongue slipped... More like a candy in a crow's mouth!

Ok, ok. I'll give up!

Like sandal shining in the darkest night!

(He reaches her and takes her by hair)

Please brother! I promise... no more jokes! Please, let me go.

(Towards Dolly)

Like a magic flute in the hands of the Dark Lord.

(The two women hug)

(0:36:44 – 0:37:26)

The visual contrast in complexion between husband and wife is probably immediately evident to an Indian audience, especially after the recent debates about skinwhitening products and other cultural ideals of beauty. Due to her uncommon whiteness, Dolly too is singled out; for instance, an elder remarks that she is alien to that place (Gusain, 2013: 117).

OMKARA: What are you staring at, Grandma?

GRANDMA: Staring at your luck!

(Everyone laughs)

GRANDMA: How in the world did you get such a fair girl in these parts?!

(0:37:34 – 0:37:44)

In her teasing, Indu compares Omkara with the "Dark Lord," that is with Krishna, the dark-skinned god who is traditionally depicted while playing a flute. In the

form of Hinduism called Vaishnavism, Krishna is viewed as both a supreme deity and as a manifestation of Vishnu, the god of creation and destruction. In Sanskrit, his name means “dark,” “black,” “dark blue,” and also “all attractive.” By drawing a parallel between Omi and Krishna, Indu makes a virtue of her brother’s dark complexion: he is the most powerful in his entourage. Though less explicitly, the woman also emphasises the humble origins which equate both gangster and god. In effect, Krishna’s flute-playing is associated with his cowherding past in Uttar Pradesh, where also Omi’s family is from. Omkara exerts his dominance both within and outside the town, but he always returns to his rural, farming community (Heidenberg, 2014: 94). Other parallels with the deity are suggested by Pandit Hogan, who stresses that not only is Krishna’s flute white (as Dolly is), but also the god’s beloved Radha is of the same colour, which is that of the moon and the champak flower (2010: 55).

By casting Dolly as Krishna’s flute, however, it seems that the woman is placed in a subservient role with respect to the man. As a matter of fact, as a flute cannot produce a sound without its cowherd, according to *parda* rules Dolly must be silent in public unless prompted by Omkara. Nevertheless, Indu’s simile also makes the wife essential to the husband because, in order to call his herd in, a cowherd must necessarily have an instrument. Hence, “[w]ithout his flute, Krishna is not Krishna; without Dolly, Omkara cannot be Omkara.” Indu thus elevates Dolly’s female role by making her necessary to her husband, family, and village as a whole (Heidenberg, 2014: 94).

In terms of caste, all the main characters are Brahmins. Traditionally, Brahmins do not bear arms; instead, they wear the sacred thread that displays their commitment to the basic *dharma*⁴⁴ of truth and non violence. In the movie, this custom is reversed, because the characters wear the thread but also carry weapons and settle disputes with violence. The camera repeatedly lingers on their sacred cords, thus underlining their caste identity: Langda’s unclothed torso, with the thread in plain sight, is frequently shot, as well as Omkara’s; Kesu’s one is shown only during the ritual ceremony in which he is appointed as *bahubali*. Still in terms of attire connected to social status, on some significant meetings, Omkara wears an all black *chaddar*⁴⁵ with a wide red border, a garment that in tribal areas is usually worn by those robbers and dacoits who see themselves as overthrowing a system. For example, he wears it when he is summoned by Dolly’s father to respond for the abduction of his daughter (Pandit Hogan, 2010: 56).

⁴⁴ From Sanskrit, literally meaning “decree” or “custom.”

⁴⁵ A cross between a blanket and a shawl.

Despite his established reputation in his village and gang, for whose members he is simply “Brother Omi,” since Omkara was born of a high-caste father and a low-caste mother (a so-called *dalit*), he is sometimes identified as a half-caste. He is also a *harami* (an illegitimate child), because his mother was the maid in his father’s household and was thus referred to as a *kanjari* (a prostitute). It is his fiancée that lovingly reassures him that “a crescent, though half, is still called a moon” (0:51:00 – 0:51:10).

As proven by the following conversation, Omi’s otherness is put to the foreground early in the film, then it is gradually made to recede and is substituted by a focus on love and jealousy.

DOLLY’S FATHER: Even dogs show more character... Omi! Was my daughter the only girl left in the province? Actually, it’s my fault... I had forgotten you are a half caste. That bloody slave girl had borne you... right? Bloody bastard!

OMKARA: You’re right as always, sir... Wish you knew that your own daughter’s heart beats for this half caste.

DOLLY’S FATHER: Bastard!

(He takes out the gun and aims it at Omi’s forehead)

(0:10:00 – 0:10:40)

Shahani and Charry underline that, despite these allusions, “caste hardly matters to most of the men who inhabit Omkara’s world,” so the film differentiates itself from some earlier Indian cinema in which caste served as a divisive social force (2014: 173-174). Even Dolly’s father, who is the first to underline Omi’s bloodline, shortly afterwards refers to it as an afterthought, stressing first Omkara’s being a gangster, then a monster, and only finally a half-caste (Charry and Shahani, 2014: 115).

BHAISAAB: I have known Omkara since his childhood... But I’ve never heard about him being a womanizer.

(Dolly’s father bursts into tears)

DOLLY’S FATHER: You’ve even known Dolly since she was a toddler. You think she would’ve eloped with this gangster willingly. Our home fire’s been hushed since yesterday... The whole community’s slandering us... How can you expect me to hand over my precious jewel to that monster?! He’s a damned half caste at that! I have no more to live... I need justice, Bhaisaab!

(0:13:20 – 0:14:40)

Also Verma asserts that Omkara's match with Dolly is objected mainly because he is a gangster (2012: 92), and when Langda sows the seeds of doubt in Omi's mind, he does not evoke his condition of "other" as a possible reason for Dolly's unfaithfulness, as instead Iago does.

OTHELLO: And yet how nature, erring from itself –
IAGO: Ay, there's the point: as, to be bold with you,
Not to affect many proposed matches
Of her own clime, complexion and degree,
Whereto we see, in all things, nature tends –
Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.
But pardon me, I do not in position
Distinctly speak of her, though I may fear
Her will, recoiling to her better judgement,
May fall to match you with her country forms,
And happily repent.
(3.3.231-42)

The status of "outsider," from being attributed to Omkara, is then shifted to Kesu and to the three female characters (Dolly, Indu, and Billo). These are figures that, in a certain way, represent either the Western or the modern, two categories that, in the Indian context, are usually made to coincide. As Cassio is a Florentine among Venetians, Kesu is the "Firangi," the "foreigner." The history of the word "firangi" is connected to India's relation with English culture and colonialism, and it is mostly used to refer to foreignised or modernised Indians (Pandit Hogan, 2010: 55). Kesu can be said to have a more well-defined personality than Shakespeare's Cassio and, unlike the other Indian male characters, whose attire is traditional, his clothing is more stylish and contemporary. He wears a short-sleeve shirt and a waistcoat, or a short-sleeve shirt and a T-shirt, most of the time, his hair is lighter, and he himself is relatively light-skinned. When he speaks, he switches easily from Hindi to English; he sings and strums the guitar. Moreover, he is often seen on his motorcycle. Nevertheless, his Westernised status is frequently ridiculed, so much so that he is called "that dog," "the foreigner," and also "Anglo shit."

DOLLY'S FATHER: Where is Omi? Where the hell is he?

KESU (shrugging his shoulders defiantly): I don't know man...

ONE OF THE LAWYER'S HENCHMEN (punching him in the face): You Anglo shit!

(0:09:06 – 00:09:20)

On the one hand, those who dislike him define him as naive and childish, not man enough, for example, to drink the strong country brew enjoyed by his companions. On the other, as testified to by the crowd's eruption following his being appointed as *bahubali*, he is very popular among university students. He has charm on girls, who can befriend him (like Dolly), or love him (like Billo). For instance, when at college Dolly gives him a letter for Omkara, she finds him seated on a bench chatting (and probably flirting) with a smiling girl. The "Western" he epitomises does not entail power in any real sense, but it nonetheless possesses certain attractions, like glamour, the fascination of novelty, and the vibrancy of youth. Omkara, near-sighted and too traditional, is gradually made to think that Kesu's Westernisation, modernity, and freshness are the characteristics his Dolly is looking for. Hence, he misconstrues reality because he exaggerates the threat. Viewers, in fact, realise that Kesu is not menacing at all, also because, unlike Cassio, he seems to feel a real sentiment of love for Billo/Bianca, so much so that he is determined to marry her (Charry and Shahani, 2014: 116-117).

Gusain stresses that Kesu's speaking of English is a sign of "upward social mobility and cultural superiority." Together with Dolly, of whom he attended the same college, he is the only person who can sing "Happy Birthday" at Golu's birthday. His linguistic skills, however, are even superior to his friend's ones, so that he teaches her to sing Stevie Wonder's *I just called to say I love you* correcting her American mispronunciation of the word "bottom." His attractiveness, education, and alleged foreignness, along with his young age, in spite of stigmatising him as "alien" and being the cause of Omkara's suspect of Dolly's infidelity, are also the reason why Omi initially decides to choose him as his heir over Langda: with such a charismatic representative, the party is more likely to receive the votes of the educated youth (2013: 117-118).

The "judicious mixture of tradition and modernity," as Charry and Shahani define it, is instead to be found in Dolly, who, alongside possessing Western traits, represents authentic "Indianness." Generally speaking, in much recent Indian cinema, the main female character goes to college and tends to choose Westernised clothes and career: "[s]he is sexy but a virgin, flirty and daring, but easily and willingly makes the

transition to dutiful wifeness and motherhood.” College-educated Dolly, who speaks and writes in English, partially corresponds to this description. She appears to be Westernised starting from her name, which infantilises her. She signs off her love letter to Omkara in English, and her Hindi is devoid of those Mewati and Bangru influences that characterise the speak of some of the other characters, including Omkara and Langda. Most significantly, she refuses to marry the man her family has chosen for her and, like Shakespeare’s Desdemona, she elopes with her lover. She preserves the Indian tradition in her always wearing a typical Indian attire, in her anxiousness of being a perfect wife, in her working on her culinary skills. Her Westernisation has possibly had a role in conquering Omi’s heart, but, eventually, it contributes to making him suspect of her untruthfulness in feelings and emotions, thus arousing his ire (2014: 117-118).

On a final note, according to Sen, Bhardwaj’s movie underplays both race and caste, but foregrounds the issue of misogyny, already discussed by Shakespearean critics as regards to the original play. The scholar provides evidence by quoting Kesu’s supposed philandering and Bhaisaab’s anti-women jokes at the wedding ceremony (2010: 236). Chambers, instead, underpins that the film, in which violence affects both public and private life, also raises concerns encompassing violence against women. For example, when Omkara interrogates Dolly about the lost waistband, he pushes her on the bed, thus provoking her a bruise under her right eye. The cummerbund itself, which Omkara gives Dolly instead of the Shakespearean handkerchief, has alleged sexual overtones, because it suggests a chastity belt locking up the woman’s honour (2016: 19). Bhardwaj, instead, sums up that Othello-Omkara “has complexes about the beauty of his wife. [...] Not handsome and a half-caste, he wonders if he is worthy of Desdemona-Dolly” (cited in Mukherjee, 2014: 212).

4.3 Analysis of a scene

4.3.1 A tragic ending: differences and similarities in Bhardwaj, Khan, Shakespeare and Welles

In this section, I compare the ending of *Omkara* with the ending of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, by focusing, in particular, on the dramatic climax that leads to the title character’s suicide. Moreover, I analyse the conclusion of two other noteworthy films: Mehboob Khan’s *Mother India* (1957) and Orson Welles’s *Othello* (1952). Though not being related in terms of storyline, these two movies share a similar structure: present time – long flashback – present time.

Omkara's final climax begins with Dolly's murder on the night of her wedding. Dolly is sleeping alone on her marriage bed, while *Omkara* leans against the window, arms crossed, looking at her. Hearing a shot in the distance, she suddenly wakes up. Omi addresses his newly bride and tells her that her "lover, Kesu," has not even been able to treasure her *kamarbandh*: he shows it and throws it at her. Dolly seems happy, so much so that she asks him where he found it. "You've been stripped naked," he exclaims angrily, while the bed, which is hung to the ceiling, keeps on oscillating. He interrogates her about her affair with Kesu; for example, he wants to know when they slept together for the first time. Neither does she utter a single word nor does she try to defend herself from his accusations: she only looks into his eyes, weeping. She tells him that he is free to take her life, almost making him believe that she has really had an affair with the *bahubali*. A heartrending hug between the two follows. Omi asks her, "Did I lack anything?", then he violently pushes her onto the bed. He thus takes a pillow and starts smothering her. Dolly grabs his left cheek and sticks her nails into it: she moans and shakes, but nobody else is there, so that she can do nothing to save herself from his violence. Her arm soon falls dangling from the bed, of which the audience continue to hear the creaking. The camera frames this scene through a rope curtain, then the setting changes, and the focus lingers first on Rajju's corpse among the grass, then on Kesu's body. Kesu, who has been hit in the arm by a bullet, is discovered not to be dead: he coughs and tries to stand up.

After this brief interlude, the scene is moved to *Omkara*'s house again, where Indu is shot in high angle while she opens the doors wide and, frightened, runs screaming "Omi bro!". She rushes upstairs, enters Dolly and *Omkara*'s bedroom, then orders her brother to go seeing what has happened, because she knows that massive bloodshed has been caused. In the meantime, Omi is seated on the bed, looking at Dolly in apparent remorse. Indu shakes him, and only afterwards she notices her sister-in-law's inert body. Breathless, she walks towards her, removes the pillow from her face, then falls kneeling beside the bed. *Omkara* throws the *kamarbandh* onto his wife's corpse and exclaims: "Two faced character!". Indu, shocked, murmurs that she, herself, stole the cummerbund. *Omkara* now stares at her, speechless, realising his fatal error. Langda too reaches the compound, enters, looks left and right in the yard. Meanwhile, in the bedroom, Dolly's corpse still lies on the bed, *Omkara* is seated next to it, shoulders to the camera and low head; Indu is standing, leaning against the wall. Langda enters the room, limping. He glances at Dolly, who is apparently sleeping, then

whispers: “Omi bro!”. Omkara does not answer; Indu, instead, approaches him, shows him the cummerbund, and slaps him in the face. He orders her to go home, but in response she slaps him again. Langda grabs his wife violently and, insulting her, repeats her to go home. Omi calls him by name and, after the man has slackened the grasp, he moves towards him with a gun in his hand. Langda moves back, asserting that his wife is lying, that she too seems to have an affair. He tries to make up excuses, until their eyes meet. Langda thus understands that it is not time to play anymore, so that he asks Omi to release him by shooting at him in the head. Omkara aims the gun at his brother-in-law’s heart: Langda walks back, his eyes closed. The gangster, however, does not fire because he does not want to help free his body. On the contrary, he closes the door in his face. Langda turns, incredulous, and moves away: the camera shoots him from the back while he limps down the stairs. He opens the entrance gate, but finds Indu in front of him, with gritted teeth and smudged makeup. She screams and hits him. The camera rapidly moves to Langda, who holds his bloodstained neck first with a hand, then with the other. He staggers, then falls.

The scene is shot from above: Indu moves slowly towards her husband, while he wheezes and shakes on the ground. In front of him, the desperate woman makes the blade fall. The image is kept as such for some seconds, while in the background the song *Jag Ja*, already used by Omkara to wake his wife up, starts to resound. Omi is lying on the bed next to Dolly’s corpse: outside, everything is quiet and the coloured lights used for the wedding are switched on; inside, he starts murmuring the song’s lyrics in a tender but heartbreaking way. In the meantime, Indu is shot hanging out over a well, crying. The camera frames this scene from inside the well. She presumably lets herself fall into it, even though it is not completely clear. Such an image makes viewers be reminded of Dolly’s words when she explained how she fell in love with Omkara though being already engaged with Rajju:

DOLLY: I remember feeling like a blind bird plunging down an empty well.

Everything was hopeless.

(0:18:08 – 0:18:20)

Immediately afterwards, someone else knocks at the door of Omi’s bedroom: it is Kesu, who finds himself in front of the appalling crime.

KESU (murmuring): How did you ever think?

OMKARA: Hush now! One more word and it's all over.

KESU: Isn't it all over anyway?

OMKARA (standing up and approaching Kesu): No, it isn't over yet. Forgotten how I pasted the Army Guy in court? (He aims the gun at Kesu's temple) Bang on the temple... boom! And our friend Indore Singh? Shoved the gun right up his mouth and... Boom! (He fakes the action) And Thakur? Right through his heart.

(2:26:30 – 2:28:16)

This last sentence is pronounced while the camera is focused on Kesu's back. Therefore, the audience do not see either Kesu or Omkara, who is totally covered by the youngster's body. This time, Omkara does not make his exclamation be followed by "boom," but the shot is heard nonetheless, so much so that the audience do not know if Omi has just killed Kesu or has killed himself. The next moment, however, spectators are shown Omkara with the gun aimed at his own heart, and his white wedding suit covered in blood. He falls on the ground; Kesu, instead, walks back in terror. After such an escalation of tragic scenes, an unbearably sad frame closes the film: the bed, creaking, is still swinging. On it, Dolly's corpse lies, under it, Omkara's.



Figure 20

Omkara ends with both Omkara's and Langda's families losing their *izzat*: Omi has destroyed his own by killing his wife; Langda by causing all the events that have brought to such a bloody conclusion. As the former has neither male heirs nor brothers, and the latter's son is too young to revenge, according to *izzat* it seems to be Indu's responsibility to restore the whole family's honour. She thus kills her husband with a single, quick slash to his neck by using a blade, which is a characteristically female tool significantly associated with grain threshing and food preparation. In the scene of the murder, the camera closes up tightly on her, accentuating her angered and elongated eyes ringed with kohl. Like most Hindu deities Indu is gazing directly at viewers, and at her husband as well. As Heidenberg underpins, in religious iconography, the gods' eyes

are the last elements to be painted; moreover, they are “opened” as part of a ritual called *darsan*, which means “seeing.” Once this ceremony has been held, it is commonly believed that the deity comes to inhabit his/her icon. In the case of Langda’s assassination, Indu appears to be enhanced as a manifestation of a vengeful goddess, usually identified with Kali. Furthermore, even though she is the only character in the movie that never sings, when she kills Langda “the soundtrack features a swirling, discordant cacophony of undifferentiated notes, including electric guitar parts that seem to mimic the wind, thunder, and other natural forces.” This discordant music, which is an anomaly in Bollywood, is punctuated by her scream of anger (2014: 99).



Figure 21

As already pointed out, the ending of *Omkara* echoes part of the ending of Mehboob Khan’s *Mother India* (1957). In particular, Indu’s killing of her husband and her bloodcurdling scream over the well can be compared with Radha’s killing of her son and her mournful howl after it.

Khan’s epic drama starts in India in the 1950s. Radha, who is considered to be the mother of her entire village, is asked to inaugurate the opening of a new irrigation canal. After her initial refusal, she is finally convinced and made to attend the ceremony. Smelling a flower from the wreath that she is put around the neck, she is reminded of her wedding with Shamu, during whose traditional ritual she was made to wear a similar garland. From this recalling, a flashback of her whole hard life begins. It encompasses: the loan that Shamu’s mother received for the wedding from the moneylender Sukhilala and the immediate economic difficulties deriving from it; Shamu’s incident in the rocky field, after which he lost both arms and eventually decided to leave his family not to be a burden for them. Radha’s memory goes through the death of her mother-in-law and of the youngest of her three sons; it includes the severe flood that devastated the entire village, ruined the harvest, and made her children starve. On that particular occasion, fearing for her kids’ life, Radha seriously thought about “selling her body” to the moneylender in exchange for grams, so much so that she

tore off her *mangalsutra*⁴⁶ and threw it away. After the necklace landed on a small shrine dedicated to Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, she nonetheless regained pride, firmly refused the usurer's offer, and subsequently persuaded her fellow villagers to start again and rebuild their village. Together with Birju and Ramu, her two survived sons, she spent the following years working the land and profiting from it. The last part of the movie thus focuses on more recent years, when Ramu and Birju are two young men: the former is calm-tempered and good-natured, while the latter appears to be extremely frustrated and resentful about the moneylender's continuous requests over the years. The relationship with his mother is nonetheless profound, as it has always been since childhood. To let Radha have her bridal bracelets back, he even comes to attack Sukhilala and his daughter Rupa, a girl that has always enjoyed provoking and making fun of him. Due to his aggressive, unacceptable behaviour, Birju is eventually thrown out of the village, thus becoming a dacoit. He comes back with a gang only on Rupa's wedding day to abduct her: he mixes up and destroys all the usurer's accounts, kills the moneylender, then runs away with the bride on his horse.

[Mother and son are one in front of the other. Radha is holding a rifle.]

RUPA: Save me!

RADHA: Birju! Let her go. Or I'll kill you!

BIRJU: You cannot kill me. You are my mother.

RADHA: I'm first a woman.

BIRJU: I'm your son.

RADHA: She is the daughter of the entire village. Our honour. Birju, I can give up a son. But not my honour!

BIRJU: Kill me if you can! I will not break my vow! (And he runs away.)

(2:51:42 – 2:52:12)⁴⁷

In order to preserve the honour of the village, Radha shoots resolutely at him from a distance, screaming his name piercingly. Both Rupa and Birju fall from the horse: Rupa runs away, while Birju tries to stand up. Radha, instead, remains on the hill, holding the shotgun and gazing severely at her son. "She represents justice and power, unwilling to compromise her values, even for her son" (McDonald, 2013: 23).

⁴⁶ It is the necklace that symbolises her marriage.

⁴⁷ This conversation is taken from the English subtitles of the subtitled version of *Mother India* available at: <<https://einthusan.tv/movie/watch/3VvJ/?lang=hindi>>



Figure 22

Birju finally manages to stand up on his feet. He takes out his mother's golden bridal bracelets from his shirt; Radha makes the rifle fall on the ground and runs towards him. The two eventually meet in a hug: no more an avenger, but again his mother, she holds him up tenderly. Birju dies wrapped in Radha's bloodstained arms, while she keeps weeping and pronouncing his name. The camera lingers on Birju's blood on her hands: this image then overlaps with the red water of the new irrigation canal, whose colour derives from silt. With this scene, the flashback comes to an end, but the link between the young man's blood and red water is made to signify that the woman's past sacrifice sustains the whole village in the present as well. Heidenberg argues that Indu's killing of Langda "performs a similarly sustaining function for her family's honour, and at similar personal cost." What lacks in *Omkaara*, instead, is the sense of hope with which *Mother India* ends (2014: 100).



Figure 23



Figure 24

In *Othello's* fast-paced ending (which Bhardwaj followed though introducing substantial changes), after Roderigo's failed attempt to kill Cassio, Cassio's wounding of Roderigo, Iago's stabbing of Cassio, then Iago's killing of Roderigo in a street in Cyprus, act 5.2 is set in Othello and Desdemona's bedroom in Cyprus castle. Desdemona is sleeping, while the Moor, who, having heard Cassio's apparent cries of murder, believes that Iago's vengeance has been exacted, is meditating out loud on his determinacy to kill her. He kisses repeatedly his "unfaithful" wife, who thus wakes up. Othello orders her to pray for pardon, because she must prepare to die. She becomes increasingly frightened by her husband's behaviour and asks him why he wants her

death; hence, he accuses her of having given Cassio the handkerchief he gifted her with, and does not believe in her denial of the charge. Moreover, he makes her know that Cassio has confessed the whole affair but cannot speak anymore because he has just been murdered by Iago. This causes her weeping, which makes Othello even more enraged. Unlike Dolly, who does not utter a word, Desdemona asks him to let her live some more. He does not agree and suddenly smothers her to death.

At this point, Emilia calls from outside the door. Othello thinks that it is his wife's voice, so much so that he smothers her again as he does not want to have her linger in such a pain. Continuing to hear someone calling him, he realises it is Emilia; though doubtful, he draws the bed curtains and lets her in. Emilia informs her master that Cassio has killed Roderigo, but Cassio himself, despite being wounded, is still alive. The maid then hears some laments coming from the bed: it is Desdemona, who is crying out that she is going to die. Asked who has murdered her, the woman replies that she has killed herself. Othello, however, intervenes and reveals that he is the assassin, because Iago has made him open his eyes on Desdemona's falsehood and unfaithfulness. Emilia begins to insult both men and, unfazed by Othello's threats, calls for help: Montano (the former governor of Cyprus), Gratiano (Desdemona's uncle), and Iago arrive on stage. The maid accuses her husband, until the truth comes out. At their words, Othello lets himself fall upon the bed over his wife's corpse. Unlike in *Omkara*, where no news concerning Dolly's father after his daughter's elopement is given, Gratiano makes the audience know that Desdemona's father, Brabantio, has died of a broken heart: fortunately, he has not lived enough to see his daughter's life end in such a terrible way. Othello continues to cling to his belief in Iago by mentioning both Cassio's confession and the handkerchief Desdemona presumably donated to him. Yet, at the mentioning of the napkin, Emilia discloses that she was the person who found it and gave it to her husband. Iago tries to silence her with his sword but is stopped by Gratiano; Othello runs at Iago, but he is disarmed as well. In the commotion, which is not adapted in the film, the villain manages to finally stab his wife to death, then runs away. Gratiano and Montano pursue him. Meanwhile, the maid dies singing a snatch of the *Willow Song*, repeating to Othello that his wife was chaste and truly loved him. Othello calls Gratiano back, and, in his presence, mourns the loss of Desdemona. Shortly afterwards, the two are joined by Montano, Lodovico, Cassio (carried in a chair), and Iago (now held as a prisoner). Before being disarmed, Othello attacks Iago

again, wounding him. Iago bleeds, but he is not killed. Like Omkara, Othello is not unhappy, as he thinks that death would only help him free his body and soul:

IAGO: I bleed, sir, but not killed.

OTHELLO: I am not sorry neither, I'd have thee live:

For, in my sense 'tis happiness to die.

(5.2.285-7)

Iago refuses to add anything more about what he has done and decides to keep silent. The whole truth is uncovered thanks to two letters found in Roderigo's pockets, another detail completely omitted from the Indian cinematic version. Interrogated by Othello, Cassio subsequently confirms that he came across the handkerchief in his room. Hence, Lodovico orders the Moor to follow them back to Venice, where he will be stripped of his rank and put on trial. The general stabs himself to death with a hidden dagger, but first delivers a monologue in which he recalls the time when he served the Venetian state (5.2.336-53). He eventually falls on the marriage bed where his wife lies, dying upon a kiss.

A remarkable cinematic version of Shakespeare's *Othello* is Orson Welles's black and white movie by the same title. Since in this subchapter I am analysing the tragedy's ending, I have chosen this post-war adaptation because of its peculiar structure: the film opens with a variation of the play's ending. More precisely, viewers are shown a Christian funeral cortege led by hooded pallbearers carrying Othello's and Desdemona's bodies on the ramparts of Cyprus fort. As Hindle stresses, in the four-minute pre-titles opening sequence Welles evokes "a sombrely tragic atmosphere with the dirge-like sounds of a pounding percussive piano and a wailing choir" (2007: 32). In particular, the very first image the audience see is an upside-down shot of Othello's face: the camera focuses on it, pulls back, then gets closer again and lingers on it. In the same opening, Iago, after having been dragged ahead on a rope like an animal, is thrown into a cage, hoisted up against the high walls of the island, and there displayed as a traitor.



Figure 25

Following this opening scene, the screen slowly gets black, then the title is displayed: *The Tragedy of Othello. The Moor of Venice*. The subsequent caption, instead, underlines that the film is an adaptation: “A Motion Picture Adaptation of the play by William Shakespeare.” The setting is thus transferred to Venice, which serves as a background while a voice-over narrates Othello and Desdemona’s falling in love. From this moment on, Shakespeare’s tragedy is filmed as a truncated scene-by-scene version of the original theatrical work, where the director creates “a striking ensemble of visual and aural effects capturing a number of the play’s key themes, especially that of entrapment” (Hindle, 2007: 33).

Towards the ending of the movie, Roderigo’s clumsy attempt to murder Cassio takes place in a Turkish bath, while a boy is playing a lute. Among steam and several men wrapped in towels, the sound of the instrument grows increasingly frantic. Iago intervenes by stabbing the lieutenant in the back, then he repeatedly thrusts his sword through the floorboards and wounds the naive Roderigo to death. In the meantime, in the nuptial bed chamber, after Emilia has delivered her speech about the plight of womanhood and has moved away, Othello’s shadow is seen on the walls. When the Moor says, “It is the cause, it is the cause my soul,” the screen becomes pitch-black whilst a clang of iron doors follows his meditation on his wife’s imminent murder. As he snuffs out the candles at the altar, Desdemona lies down. When he sweeps the curtains aside, she closes her eyes and waits for him, pretending to sleep. As in the original tragedy, Othello wants her to make confession, but she denies any accusations. He cries “Strumpet!” and his voice resounds in an echo chamber. He then snatches the bed sheet, puts it over her face, and tightens it. He finally kisses her “death mask,” mourns her, and blames himself for having committed such an impious crime.



Figure 26

Emilia knocks: as Othello turns, his wife’s body rolls off the bed and falls on the floor. The action then continues as in the Shakespearean play. Emilia, who remains the one to disclose the truth, is eventually stabbed to death by Iago. Othello, after having

been told that he has lost his power and that Cyprus will be governed by Cassio, commits suicide:

his death is seen subjectively, the ceiling whirling round as he experiences an attack of vertigo, the choir shrilling, windows spinning, the bed now the focus of the composition as witnesses peer down from a hole in the ceiling and Othello carries Desdemona's body to the bed. (Higham, 1970: 144)

While the Moor delivers his final speech, the camera isolates his face in complete darkness by shooting him in a high-angle shot. After he falls dead with Desdemona's corpse in his arms, the camera stops on husband's and wife's bodies, still filming them from above. The door concealing the hole in the ceiling is ultimately slammed shut. The audience is thus returned to the initial funeral procession, so that the whole movie ends in a full circle (Higham, 1970: 143-144).

Chapter 5

Haider (2014)

5.1 The context

The extraordinary magnitude of “the *Hamlet* phenomenon,” as Thompson and Taylor define the enduring fascination exerted by this Shakespearean tragedy (2016: 2), together with the challenges it poses to scholars and critics, have reached India too. In the history of the screen versions of *Hamlet*, its first sound cinematic adaptation was produced precisely in the subcontinent in 1935 by Sohrab Modi, and it was given the title of *Khoon Ka Khoon* (“Blood for Blood”). Not a remarkable commercial success, this film is based on earlier Parsi theatre versions of Shakespeare’s play of which it retains the Urdu language and the syncretic qualities; the setting is Victorian, while the characters are given Indian names. Two decades later, in the post-independence India of 1954, *Hamlet* was adapted again by Kishore Sahu. Blending some of the characteristics of Parsi theatre productions with the style of Laurence Olivier’s *Hamlet* (1948), Sahu kept the Shakespearean title, the characters’ names, and also followed the original play-text faithfully. In this film, the director recreated European castles and costumes, but also inserted some Indian songs like the famous *Na Kisi Ki Aankh Ka Noor Hoon*, a *ghazal*⁴⁸ composed by the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, which, in the movie, is sung by Ophelia at the peak of her madness. Since Sahu’s adaptation, there have not been other Bollywood versions of *Hamlet* until Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Haider* (2014), the movie which closes the director’s trilogy. Vidhu Vinod Chopra’s Mumbai-produced *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* (2007), in fact, begins with a Shakespearean sonnet but continues more as an allusion to *Hamlet* than as a proper cinematic version of it. Apart from Bollywood, the popularity of *Hamlet* in the Indian subcontinent has been testified to by some recent regional adaptations, such as V. K. Prakash’s *Karmayogi* (2012), in Malayalam, and Anjan Dutt’s *Hemananta* (2016), in Bengali (from note 5 in Sen, 2018).

Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Haider* reproduces Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* by transposing its setting from late-Medieval “rotten” Denmark (1.4.90) to the embattled Kashmir of 1995, a region over which both India and Pakistan have fought since Partition in 1947.

⁴⁸ A lyric poem consisting of a fixed number of verses (minimum five and maximum fifteen syntactically complete couplets) and of a repeated rhyme. A *ghazal* typically explores the themes of love, melancholy, longing and metaphysical questions, and it is normally set to music.

Amidst insurgencies and civilian disappearances, the 1990s were troubled times in the land, as the Indian army's brutalities escalated and the number of captured Kashmiri militants increased. The first half of the film attempts to set the scene against this political backdrop, while the Shakespearean plot is developed mainly in the second half. From the original theatrical work the film borrows the basic "mytheme" of the son that wants to avenge himself on his uncle, the villain that has caused the death of his father and got married with his mother; it re-enacts the protagonist's angst and ludicrous temperament, as well as his responsibility in the killing of two boyhood friends and of the father and brother of his beloved. The rapid descent into madness and the subsequent suicide of the heartthrob are adapted as well (Sarkar, 2016: 34-35).

Prince Hamlet becomes Haider, a student at Aligarh Muslim University (Uttar Pradesh) who returns to Wajura, his Kashmiri village, after having been informed that his doctor father, Hilaal Meer (King Hamlet), has been taken away by the Indian army for having performed an appendectomy on Ikhlāq Latif (the leader of a pro-separatist group) at his home. In addition to having been revealed his father's disappearance, on his coming-back the young man finds his house reduced to rubble and his mother Ghazala (Gertrude) staying at his uncle Khurram's (Claudius), where she apparently enjoys singing and laughing with him. Shocked at her behaviour, the morally-devastated Haider begins to look for his father, or at least for some news about him, visiting several police stations and detention camps. In this search, he is helped by his beloved Arshia, a journalist that plays the part of both Ophelia and Horatio. When Haider is about to lose hope, the young woman encounters a stranger named Roohdaar (the Ghost), who subsequently tells the doctor's son about his father's imprisonment and death. Moreover, this mysterious man gives him a gun and conveys to him Hilaal's message, that is, to take revenge on the traitor, his very uncle Khurram, aiming "his bullets at those deceiving eyes that entrapped his mother" (1:17:42 - 1:17:50)⁴⁹. Following such a grim discovery, Haider shaves his head, starts to dress in a dishevelled way, and begins to behave strangely. Moreover, after Ghazala's wedding ceremony with Khurram, he re-enacts his uncle's betrayal in the performance of *Bismil*, one of the music interludes of the film that corresponds to "The Mousetrap" in *Hamlet*. Due to the youth's alleged insanity, Khurram wants to have him treated in a mental institute: the young man is finally caught by the police after having aimed the gun at his uncle's head while the

⁴⁹ Throughout this dissertation, all the dialogues and expressions taken from Bhardwaj's *Haider* correspond to the English subtitles of the subtitled version of the film available at: <https://einthusan.tv/movie/watch/8326/?lang=hindi>

latter was praying for pardon for his sins. Haider manages to escape by killing Salman and Salman (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), who, on their part, have been given the task to shoot him dead. Before crossing the border for training with militants on Roohdaar's suggestion, the protagonist agrees to meet his mother, who eventually understands she has been the cause of her husband's death by being the Indian army's informer via Khurram. Arshia's father Parvez (Polonius), a police officer that has traced Haider till the ruined house, suddenly interrupts their encounter: he is murdered by the young man, who, almost as a reflex action, fires a shot to defend himself and hits him in the head. Unable to face this tragic situation, Arshia commits suicide; Haider learns of her death directly at the graveyard, where he sees her brother Liyaqat (Laertes) in mourning and is attacked by him ferociously. In the fight, Liyaqat dies; soon afterwards, escorted by some members of the armed forces, Khurram arrives at the cemetery too. Ghazala, driven there by Roohdaar, tries to convince her son to both surrender and desist from revenge. Incapable of succeeding in her intent, she makes herself blow out in the middle of the graveyard by pulling the pins of a suicide vest. Only Haider and Khurram survive: a seriously-injured Haider approaches his uncle to have his ultimate revenge, but, once in front of him, he is reminded of his mother's last words and decides to abandon him on the snow-covered ground. Khurram, whose legs have been amputated at the blast, begs to be killed. Haider, however, ignores his pleas and leaves him there, blood-soaked and destined to an impending death. This last scene, which reflects a substantial change in comparison with the Shakespearean storyline, portrays the eponymous protagonist in his struggle between his father's wish for revenge and his mother's final admonishment, which is the repeated mantra of the whole movie: "Revenge only breeds revenge." On the whole, Bhardwaj's interpretation of Hamlet's "journey" appears to be an intimate one, as Haider seems to be less concerned with revenge than with his "deep and pervasive desire to regain or remake his lost father" (Mookherjee, 2016: 8). To some extent, the young man also acts like Omi in *Omkara*, who does not kill Langda so as not to free him from his moral turpitude.

The director's choice of setting does not make *Haider* the story of a single individual, but transforms it into the collective tragedy of an entire region. In order to convey the despair of Kashmir and the pain borne by its inhabitants, the Shakespearean soliloquies are significantly given an audience, generally a crowd, thus being remodelled into monologues. For example, *Hamlet's* memorable line, "To be or not to be," is alluded to various times, being even adopted as the slogan shouted by the

members of the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) (Mookherjee, 2016: 8). Basharat Peer, the screenwriter as well as the author of the memoir *Curfewed Night* (2008), explains that both plot and structure of *Hamlet*, whose sustained moments of self-reflexivity make it stand out in the Shakespearean canon, have perfectly fulfilled Bhardwaj's aim of focusing on those aspects of Kashmir that have often been ignored in mainstream cinema. Hence, for the third time, the filmmaker used one of the playwright's tragedies as a clever device to tell an uncomfortable story (Peer in Parthasarathy, 2016: 21), as "a distant and yet still close lens to view geopolitical conflicts like terror, violence, and surveillance" (Yates, 2016: 4). Haider's father, for example, is only one of the many "disappeared" of the region, all victims of the repressive measures used by the Indian armed forces to break the resolve of Kashmiri people (Yates, 2016: 25). Among killings and illegal detentions, the film openly shows the brutal tortures inflicted to captured militants, thus rendering the screenplay tellingly gruesome. As it could be inferred by the aforementioned plot, the Shakespearean characters' vicissitudes are followed in broad terms, but there is no real correspondence with *Hamlet's* political issues concerning the impending threat of Fortinbras, Prince of Norway, whose cinematic counterpart might be represented by either Brigadier T. S. Murthy or the insurrectionist leader Zahoor Hussain, depending on the audience's ideological stance. In fact, it is the complex politics of Kashmir that dominates the whole movie (Parthasarathy, 2016). A clear parallel can nonetheless be drawn between Denmark as a prison and Kashmir as a prison.

HAMLET: What's the news?

ROSENCRANTZ: None, my lord, but that the world's grown honest.

HAMLET: Then is doomsday near. But your news is not true. Let me question more in particular. What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of Fortune, that she sends you to prison hither?

GUILDENSTERN: Prison, my lord?

HAMLET: Denmark's a prison.

ROSENCRANTZ: Then is the world one.

HAMLET: A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards and dungeons - Denmark being one o'th' worst.

ROSENCRANTZ: We think not so, my lord.

HAMLET: Why, then, 'tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison.

(F 2.2.235 – 2.2.249)

HAIDER: I'll look for my father.

SALMAN 2: Where? In camps?

SALMAN 1: In prisons?

HAIDER: All of Kashmir is a prison. I will look for him everywhere.

(0:37:32 – 0:37:50)

Kashmir appears as a far grimmer reality than *Hamlet's* rotten Denmark. For instance, at the beginning of the movie, during an early-morning crackdown, male civilians are assembled in the school grounds, arranged in a row, then made to stand in front of a jeep to be judged. Inside the armoured car, a *mukhbir*⁵⁰, whose face is covered in a balaclava, decides about their fate: making a quick movement with the head, he means “dismissed;” honking the jeep horn, he means “detained” (Ayaz, 2015: 120). A similar scene is described in Peer’s book, which, as explained in detail in the following subchapter, constitutes the director’s major source for the first part of the movie.

[T]hey were ordered to walk in a queue past an armoured car. Each man was asked to stop near the window and show his face to the masked mukhbir [...].

Some mukhbirs were suspected militants who had been beaten into submission. Some mukhbirs were volunteers who worked for money. Some mukhbirs had joined the troops to seek revenge on militants for the killing of a family member. [...]

Over the next few hours we were told to form queues and walk past the mukhbir. If he raised his hand, the soldiers pounced upon him and took him away for interrogation. My turn came. I stood facing the cat whose eyes stared at me from behind his black mask.

(Peer, 2008: 52-53)

For Kashmiri viewers, also Haider’s monologue at the historic Lal Chowk (or Red Square) in Srinagar has a remarkable, symbolic meaning, since this is the place where the political leaders of the region (sly traitors in their pledges) usually deliver their talks. In this and other speeches, the young man proves to be more subtle than his Shakespearean counterpart, so much so that his words are generally “full of paradoxes, irony, and cold shrewdness” (Ayaz, 2015: 119). He is “unceasingly active in his search for his father,” so that he protests in the streets and tries to gather support along with the

⁵⁰ A Kashmiri collaborator of the Indian army who is in charge of the identification of militants and their supporters.

relatives of other disappeared men (Mookherjee, 2016: 11). Neither alienated nor philosophical, he is thus a man of action that used to hide a gun in his satchel even in his school days (Chakravarti, 2016: 130). Furthermore, once discovered the alleged truth about his father's death, unlike Hamlet he seems to be utterly determined to accomplish his objective of avenging him (Rana, 2016: 161).

As Hamlet is away from Elsinore when his father dies and is summoned home from his schooling in Wittenberg only to attend the king's funeral, Haider is not present during the events that open the movie, so he does not witness his father's arrest and disappearance. Unlike Hamlet, Haider was not sent to university in Aligarh with the sole purpose of being given a good education, but mainly because he was discovered to befriend militants. Hence, his mother Ghazala hoped that, outside Kashmir, he would have become a peaceful citizen again. The young man's "militant flicker," however, has never ceased to waver, as it is evident in both his choice to study the revolutionary poets of British India and in his defiant reply to a police officer: on his return to Srinagar, the youth is stopped by the authorities at a check post and, when asked which town he belongs to, he answers "Islamabad," thus annoying the officer. In effect, "Islamabad" is another name for "Anantnag," the capital of the homonymous Kashmiri district; being also the name of the capital of Pakistan, however, if it is pronounced provocatively as Haider does, it can convey the idea of "going across the border" (with the aim of training with rebels) (Ayaz, 2015: 120-121).

POLICE OFFICER: Your love for Kashmir is expressed as Islamabad?

HAIDER: What?

ARSHIA: Sir, Islamabad is another name for Anantnag.

POLICE OFFICER: I know. But for us... there's just one Islamabad. In Pakistan...

(0:16:08 – 0:16:25)

As at the level of the individual narrative Haider's father is the pervasive "absent presence" of the film, at the level of the regional narrative the strongest "absent presence" is precisely Pakistan, whose role in the context of Kashmiri conflicts in the 1990s cannot be ignored, even though in the movie it is almost never mentioned. Pakistan is the "other side," where camps for training and arming Kashmiri militants are located; it is the place where Haider was prevented from going to as a schoolboy, but where he is convinced to head on Roohdaar's advice. A primary, insistent focus on barbed wire, fences, and grills balances the absence of such a non-negligible state.

Moreover, from a cinematographic point of view, the idea of “undefined destination” is conveyed by Haider being continually shot while walking on, or crossing, long and often deserted paths: on a boat in Jhelum River, in his uncle’s courtyard, in the middle of an empty, tree-lined avenue while talking to his mother. These “paths” tend to “bisect the screen or extend out of the frame towards infinity further reinforcing Haider’s lack of guidance” (Mookherjee, 2016: 7-8).

When Hamlet returns home at Elsinore Castle, he is shocked to see that his mother Gertrude has already remarried, and that her new husband is none but his uncle Claudius. Similarly, when Haider comes back to Kashmir, he is appalled to interrupt a mischievous moment between his uncle Khurram and his mother Ghazala: “through a scrim of shining gauze,” he spies a joyous, intimate “spectacle” of the two singing together a Kashmiri folk song (Ayaz, 2015: 120). Claudius and Khurram are their respective nephew’s main antagonist: they are both ambitious politicians, and they both feel a certain sexual desire for their sister-in-law. In this regard, however, whilst Claudius’s love for Gertrude seems to be motivated primarily by his lust for power and by his strong will to seize his brother’s throne, Khurram’s love for Ghazala appears to be wholly sincere and lacking any other purpose (Taebi, 2015: 5). His attraction for his brother’s wife has been going on for years, as it is testified to during the conversation Ghazala has with her father-in-law about teenager Haider carrying a gun.

[This scene is part of a flashback]

HAIDER’S GRANDFATHER: (To Ghazala) This house is a ruin without your laughter.

KHURRAM: Father... (He passes him a cup of hot tea.)

GHAZALA: A bride for Khurram... and it will be a happy home.

HAIDER’S GRANDFATHER: He doesn’t seem to like any girls.

GHAZALA: Why Mr. Khurram?

KHURRAM: Well! All the pretty ones... are already married... just like you!

(Moment of general embarrassment. Khurram bursts out laughing.)

HAIDER’S GRANDFATHER: You wicked man...

(0:51:28 – 0:52:12)

Both Ophelia in the play and Arshia in the movie are sweet and innocent young women: they are in love with the title character, but their relationship with him is opposed strenuously by their father Polonius/Parvez and brother Laertes/Liyaqat. Though Arshia’s character and personality are apparently stronger than Ophelia’s, both

women seem to be heavily dependent on the men of their lives, who constantly tell them what to do. As Ophelia is persuaded by Polonius to lie to Hamlet, Arshia ends up disclosing Haider's murderous plans to Parvez. Eventually, deeply affected by the ensuing circumstances and by their father's murder at the hands of their lover, both Arshia and Ophelia plunge into madness and commit suicide. Their insanity may be seen as a final solution to assert their independence and to express their suppressed desires in a male-controlled society. A Shakespearean character that is seemingly absent from *Haider*, instead, is Horatio, one of the protagonist's closest friends and fellow students at Wittenberg University, "a studious, skeptical young man who is very much trusted by Hamlet" (Taebi, 2016: 6). At the end of the play, Hamlet, before dying, asks Horatio to relate his story; in *Haider*, by contrast, since the ending is very different, there is no need for such a faithful storyteller. Hence, his absence is not particularly felt. Some of Horatio's characteristics, however, are attributed to Arshia.

Liyaqat Lone performs the role of Laertes, whose importance in the tragedy increases after the assassination of his father Polonius. Being King Claudius incapable of murdering Hamlet by himself, he exploits Laertes and his ire to have his nephew killed. In the film, instead, Khurram, assaulted physically by Liyaqat during Parvez's funeral, promises him that wherever Haider is hiding he will not survive. The ultimate fight between the two young men is not arranged but rather occurs by chance at the graveyard during Arshia's burial. Spotting Liyaqat from a window in the gravediggers' house, Haider understands what has happened to his beloved: in unbearable pain, he immediately limps to the tomb to mourn her and look at her for the last time. By seeing him, however, the dead girl's brother totally loses control and attacks Haider, who unintentionally kills him by pushing him against a rock. Neither reference to nor use of poison is made (Taebi, 2016: 5-6).

In terms of Indian censorship, whose vague regime largely depends on the political party in government, *Haider* was issued the U/A certificate⁵¹ after 41 cuts of various kinds were ordered to be made (Parthasarathy, 2016: 20). Although Bhardwaj's adaptation won numerous awards (including the People's Choice Award at the Rome Film Festival in 2014) and received very positive ratings and reviews, Hindu nationalists called for its "boycott" because of its alleged anti-nationalism. Moreover, even though the movie criticises India more than Pakistan, the latter banned its

⁵¹ "Under Adult Guidance" or "Universal viewing in parental supervision, for kids above 12 years of age."

screening; a series of articles quoting the director defending his presentation of motherland India, instead, were published online.

“I’m also an Indian, I’m also a patriot. I also love my nation. So I won’t do anything which is antinational. But what is anti-human I will definitely comment on it.” (cited in Chaudhury, 2016: 535)

In addition to this, Kashmiri reviewers complained for the lack of a sustained critique of the military. Therefore, the film, which spawned a real media frenzy both before and after its global release in October 2014, has encouraged considerable debate (Yates, 2016: 33-34).

By Bhardwaj’s admission, *Haider* was aimed to challenge Bollywood traditional depiction of Kashmir as both a picturesque setting and as a site of anti-India militancy. Like elsewhere in the trilogy, references to Mumbai-based filmmaking industry are multiple. The Shakespearean Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become Salman and Salman, an absurd duo that runs a video library full of Hollywood movies in which they try to rent all the Bollywood ones. In both name and manners, they parody Salman Khan, a popular Indian star that acted in various top-grossing Mumbai productions of the 1990s. Similarly to Pandit and Purohit in *Maqbool*, they are sometimes viewed as an expression of comic relief: they emulate the film star’s “onscreen attire, mullet hairstyle and speech patterns,” even replicating his pelvic thrusts (usually at inopportune moments). A song sequence from Khan’s *Sangdil Sanam* (1994) is made to play in the Faraz cinema hall before suspected militants are interrogated. In such an uncommon venue, several arrested men, including Haider’s father and Roohdaar, are lined up against the flickering screen to be identified by the Indian army (Chakravarti, 2016: 131). This movie theatre corresponds to the real Firdous, a popular cinema hall in Srinagar which, after the insurgencies of 1989, was first occupied by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), then by the Border Security Force (BSF), and finally by the CRPF again, thus being transformed into both an interrogation centre and into a site of clandestine executions (Sarkar, 2017: 7-8).

Haider’s style derives more from world cinema and Hollywood than from other Bollywood movies. For instance, Chakravarti notices that the pan shots of bloodstained snow may remind viewers of David Lean’s *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), whilst night journeys, arrests, and torture scenes could recall some war movies set in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Peer himself asserts that, before writing *Haider*, he read the

screenplays of Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) and Michael Winterbottom and Mat Whitecross' *The Road to Guantanamo* (2006), a docudrama regarding the incarceration and detention of the "Tipton Three," three Muslim friends residing in England and arrested as alleged terrorists during a trip to Afghanistan in the autumn of 2001 (Chakravarti, 2016: 131-132). Apart from Bhardwaj's adaptation, a few other films have explored the political situation of Kashmir: Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Mission Kashmir* (2000), Tariq Tapa's *Zero Bridge* (2008), Aamir Bashir's *Harud* (2010), and Musa Syeed's *Valley of Saints* (2012). Watching *Haider*, however, many Kashmiris have shared for the first time a feeling of association with what is described in the movie. Basharat Peer's contribution has added a sense of realism, characteristic of his eye of reporter, to the whole production (Modak and Roy, 2016: 160).

5.1.1 The politically volatile Kashmir of the 1990s

The choice of setting *Haider* in Kashmir in 1995 is explained by the director in the preface to the original screenplay. After having found his wife Rekha crying in the middle of the night while reading Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night* (2008), Bhardwaj decided first to read the reporter's memoir himself, then to abandon his initial plan of adapting *Hamlet* into an espionage thriller involving the "Research and Analysis Wing" (R&AW)⁵² and to rather opt for a story in the tormented region of Kashmir, firmly believing that "Kashmir has been the biggest tragedy of modern India history" and that no film has been made to really capture it. The collaboration with Peer ensued spontaneously: *Haider* thus departs from being a "mere" spy thriller and instead underpins a human drama, focusing especially on the idea of loss. In the film, Kashmir is treated more than an "inert and serviceable backdrop," and, most importantly, the playwright's work is not employed "as a makeshift vehicle for [the region's] politics" (Sarkar, 2016: 34). As already stressed in the previous section, the filmmaker aimed to comment on an anti-human situation that could not be kept hidden any further.

In Indian popular culture, Kashmir used to be seen as a paradise on earth: its "idyllic beauty and lyrical scenery" have inspired poets and artists, and the traditional association of its picturesque landscape with romantic love has frequently been exploited by Mumbai's film industry. Bollywood's "most exotic colony" (as the region is defined by Sumita S. Chakravarty in her discussion of *Junglee*, a 1961 super-hit musical mainly set in the land) used to be perceived as an eroticised territory, as a place

⁵² The foreign intelligence agency of India.

for lovers and honeymoons, a sort of “Switzerland of India.” Moreover, its being a symbol of pure and unspoiled nature has often acted as a “visual therapy for audiences coping with life in overcrowded cities and towns” (Sarkar, 2016: 37-38).

Kashmiri composite culture, which blended Hindu and Islamic traditions, used to be referred to as *Kashmiriyat*: “it weaved the strong fabric of Hindu-Muslim bonding, communal harmony and socio-religious co-existence.” This Hindu-Muslim balance, however, was broken in course of time by greed for power, so that Kashmir has now become a perpetual battleground even in religious terms, the point of political contention between India and Pakistan, both claiming the legal ownership of the region (Deshmukh, 2016: 1). Hence, the whole area has been militarised and subjected to political repression to the point of drowning in an arbitrary state of violence (Mookherjee, 2016: 3).

All the film’s major characters are Muslim. References to Islam are numerous and include weddings, funerals and people in prayer. For instance, a scene shows Liyaqat attempting to make his sister Arshia swear on the Quran that she will not spend time with Haider anymore; on another occasion, Khurram, paralleling Claudius in *Hamlet*, confesses his sins to God and asks Him for pardon. Only two among the minor characters are recognisably Hindu, possibly South Indian: Brigadier T. S. Murthy and the army officer who holds Haider for interrogation when he is stopped at a check post and whom Arshia calls *masala dosa*⁵³. Most meaningfully, Roohdaar, the Ghost incarnate, does not identify himself with any religious faith, or better considers himself a Shia, a Sunni⁵⁴, and also a Hindu at the same time.

[This dialogue is part of a flashback]

ROOHDAAR: You are the body and I’m the soul... You are mortal and I am immortal!

HILAL: Are you a Shia or a Sunni?

ROOHDAAR: I am the river and the tree... I am the Jhelum and the Chinnar... I’m both... a temple and a mosque. A Shia and a Sunni, I’m both. A Hindu as well. I always was... I am... I will always be.

(1:14:02 – 1:14:40)

⁵³ A thin pancake characteristic of the Indian cuisine which is stuffed with spiced potatoes or other kinds of fillings.

⁵⁴ Shia and Sunni are two major branches of Islam.

In 1947, when British India was divided into two independent nations, the Dominion of India and the Dominion of Pakistan, via the Indian Independence Act, Kashmir, being a native princely state, was free to either join one of the two dominions or remain independent. Later that year, Pakistani troops disguised as tribesmen attacked the region, almost obliging Maharaja Hari Singh, who wanted Kashmir to be independent in order to maintain a good relationship with both neighbouring states, to seek aid from India; also the United Nations organisation was called in and asked to deal with the matter. Eventually, though under the special provisions of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, the region was made to access India. During Indo-Pak War in 1965, the political situation of Kashmir remained relatively peaceful, and its inhabitants, who were over 90 percent Muslims, did not side with Islamic Pakistan. Militantism rose in 1989, when Hindu Kashmiris were expelled. The plausible reasons suggested for this emergence of insurgency include a lack of adequate opportunities for Kashmiri youths, some political decisions taken by the central government of India, and the meddling of Pakistan in the region's affairs. As a consequence, the presence of the Indian armed forces increased in the Valley, and the Indian government instituted the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which, initially introduced to tackle terrorism, ended up giving the Indian army "the power to shoot anyone suspected of being a threat," granting officers "immunity from prosecution in a court of law" (Peer cited in Sen, 2018).

According to the special powers conferred to Indian soldiers by AFSPA, they are free to interrogate and arrest any person suspected of being linked to any militant organisations, as well as to destroy their houses. Moreover, Kashmiris have to carry their IDs with themselves in any situations. In *Haider*, the issue of losing one's personal identity is highlighted effectively in a scene where a Kashmiri man (interpreted by Basharat Peer himself) stands on the threshold of his own house without being able to enter it. Roohdaar intervenes: he asks the man to show him his identity card, frisks him as Indian officers usually do, then allows him to cross the doorsill. This man is diagnosed with a pathological condition called "New Disease," which clearly witnesses the level of juridical intervention in people's lives. In effect, by now, the men of the region are used to repeated security checks and night crackdowns. This particular episode alludes to Kashmiri author Akhtar Mohiuddin's short story "New Disease," whose copyrights were bought by the film's producers (Deshmukh, 2016: 8). In sum, by choosing Kashmir's political crisis as the ideal location of his Indian *Hamlet*, Bhardwaj

depicts “the mass graves, the “half-widows” who do not know the status of their missing husbands, the orphans, the daily curfews, and the constant surveillance by the army” (Sen, 2018).

The Rights activist Irom Sharmila Chanu fasted for sixteen years to have AFSPA revoked and the army removed from the region. AFSPA revocation, in effect, would ideally help common people live a normal civil life, far from the chaos and disorders that have been ravaging in the region since the 1990s (Deshmukh, 2016: 8). The director’s choice of a middle-class family, in which the mother is a teacher, the father is a doctor, and the son is a student, is also compelling, as it gives viewers a sense of regular life and expresses a different point of view from that of “the two extremes”: at least at the beginning, the perspective of the “disenfranchised” men and women prevails. The sources used to create such a setting are Peer’s personal vicissitudes in the political turmoil of Kashmir, as recalled in his *Curfewed Night*, and various news reports, also inserted in the movie as TV clips in black and white (Sen, 2018). *Curfewed Night*, in particular, is a memoir that describes the true lives of Kashmiris in the 1990s and the region’s pervasive state of emergency of those years, thus countering the absence of the inhabitants’ own accounts, the unwritten books about the Kashmiri experience, and the lack of Kashmiri literature in general (Peer cited in Mookherjee, 2016: 2-3).

One of the most touching and shocking scenes of the film occurs during Haider’s search for his father: a blood-soaked boy leaps out of a truck full of stinking, mutilated corpses and dances in jubilation, rejoicing to be alive. Just as an example of Bhardwaj’s use of his sources, this is a very similar episode described by Peer:

A police truck came. The bodies were put in the truck; the police put Farooq in too. The truck moved to the police control room – it was to become the site where Kashmiris would go to collect bodies of their kin in the days to come. [...] The truck stopped at the police hospital two miles from Gawkadal. [...] a teenager, whose clothes and face were drenched in blood, jumped out of the pile of bodies. The boy ran his hands on his body and cried, ‘I got no bullets. I got no bullets. I am alive.’ He stood still for a moment and suddenly ran out of the police control room building. (2008: 125)

On another occasion, mothers and wives holding photographs of their beloved sons and husbands are filmed in silent vigil in front of the army barracks, waiting patiently (and in most cases in vain) for an answer about their men's destiny (Sen, 2018).

Between 4000 and 8000 men have disappeared after being arrested by the military, paramilitary, and the police⁵⁵. Newspapers routinely refer to the missing men as 'disappeared persons,' and their waiting wives are the 'half-widows.' The government has refused to set up a commission of enquiry into the disappearances and claims that the missing citizens of Kashmir have joined militant groups and crossed for arms training in Pakistan. Many Kashmiris believe the 'disappeared' men were killed in custody and cremated in mass graves. Wives of many such men have given up hope and tried to move on. Others are obsessively fighting for justice, hoping their loved ones will return. The men and women in the park were the parents and wives of the missing men. Dirty wars seem to have a way of bringing mothers to city squares.

(Peer, 2008: 135)

Kashmiris have become the citizens of a "no man's land": not only are they searching for their disappeared relatives, they are also looking for their own selves, for their identity, and for a permanent peace in their land. In this regard, Deshmukh defines Kashmir as a "burning paradise carrying the relics of broken relations where people forlorn in their motherland" and just live of their fragmented memories. Some of the Valley's inhabitants have more or less forcefully migrated, thus now living in a state of physical and mental exile (2016: 1-2).

Further appalling scenes show the methods of torture used by the Indian security forces when they interrogate suspected militants or people accused of harbouring militants. These human rights abuses often result in physical disfigurement and lead to impotence, thus diminishing the prisoners' humanity and especially their masculinity (Mookherjee, 2016: 6). Rendered visually by Bhardwaj, these tortures are detailed in Peer's book:

'They beat us up with guns, staffs, hands. But that was nothing.' [...] 'They took you out to the lawn outside the building. You were asked to remove all your clothes, even your underwear. They tied you to a long wooden ladder and placed it near a ditch filled with kerosene oil and red chilli powder. They raised the ladder

⁵⁵ In the movie, Arshia's newspaper article reads: "Politics returns, But 8,000 still missing in Kashmir."

like a seesaw and pushed your head into the ditch. It could go on for an hour, half an hour depending on their mood.’

‘It was the beginning. At times, they would not undress you but tie you to the ladder. You almost felt relieved until they tied your pants near the ankles and put mice inside.’ [...] ‘Or they burnt your arms and legs with cigarette butts and kerosene stoves used for welding. They burn your flesh till you speak.’ [...] ‘They tied copper wire around your arms and gave high voltage shocks. Every hair on your body stood up. But the worst was when they inserted the copper wire into my penis and gave electric shocks. They did it with most boys. It destroyed many lives. Many could not marry after that.’ (2008: 147-148)

[From Roohdaar’s account to Haider. A flashback begins.]

ROOHDAAR (voiceover): MAMA-2 was the other name for hell. Men returned from there as mere shadows of themselves.

POLICE OFFICER 1 (To tortured prisoner 1): Officer... How many Area Commanders do you have in Anantnag?

POLICE OFFICER 2 (To tortured prisoner 2): Where did you get the RDX from?

POLICE OFFICER 3 (To tortured prisoner 3): Aren’t you from the Binori mosque?

POLICE OFFICER 2 (To tortured prisoner 2): Met Brigadier Badaam? Twenty children died in your bomb blasts... Do you have any children? No? You won’t father any.

POLICE OFFICER 3 (To tortured prisoner 3): Give me their names!

PRISONER 2: Sir, I swear I’m a student. I swear, sir... I’m not a militant. I’m not a militant.

[In the flashback, screams are heard and tortures are shown more or less directly.]

(1:12:26 – 1:13:20)

One of the places where captured Kashmiris are tortured is called MAMA-2, a detention centre that corresponds to the infamous PAPA-2 interrogation centre on the banks of the Dal Lake in Srinagar. This lake is a traditional Bollywood trope, as in Mumbai-produced films *shikaras*⁵⁶, and boats in general, are usually shot while crossing its waters carrying young lovers on its shores. In Bhardwaj’s movie, on the contrary, the lake has a very different connotation: the first time it is shown, a *shikara* transports the pained militant Ikhlāq to Hilaal’s village, while an ominous non-diegetic tune is played in the background; the second time, a *shikara* leads a sneering Khurram to his nephew;

⁵⁶ The traditional Kashmiri boats.

the third time, another *shikara* ride is taken by Haider to go searching for unidentified corpses. Springtime splendour is totally absent from the film, which, instead, is set during a bleak and eerie winter. From the very beginning, muted shades of brown and grey characterise both buildings and characters' clothes (Sarkar, 2016: 38).

As underpinned in the previous section of the chapter, a further key scene takes place before the clock tower at Lal Chowk: the allegedly gone-insane protagonist addresses the crowd using a broken transistor radio and a noose around his neck as his microphone. By pretending madness, Haider performs his political resistance and condemns both India and Pakistan, whose laws were distorted in such a way that they now seem to defend the oppressors rather than the oppressed (Modak and Roy, 2016: 162). Such an episode represents a turning point in both film and character's mission, as Haider adds to personal revenge also the aim to oppose the larger corrupt system dictated by the Indian government and by those local politicians that are often in connivance with the Indian forces - as testified to by his uncle Khurram (Mookherjee, 2016: 9). Freedom (*azadi*)⁵⁷, which has already been presented in preceding scenes as the street protesters' rallying cry, is what Kashmiris are asking for.

HAIDER: Against anyone acting in contravention with law or order. Law and order... (He starts to clap and incite his audience.)

CROWD (Clapping too): Law and order...

HAIDER: Order order...

CROWD: Law and order...

HAIDER: There is no law, there is no order. Made on order... Law and order...

India! Pakistan! A game on the border.

India clings to us. Pakistan leeches on... What of us? What do we want?

CROWD: Freedom!

HAIDER: Freedom from this side...

CROWD: Freedom!

HAIDER: Freedom from that side...

CROWD: Freedom!

HAIDER: We will be free!

ALL TOGETHER: Freedom!

(1:28:18 – 1:28:58)

⁵⁷ From Persian, it means "freedom." It is used in both Hindi and Kashmiri languages.

The young man's sufferings are indicative of the whole region's painful reality, here embodied by the crowd. His madness (true or false as it may be) is not judged as a reaction to a hindered love like in *Hamlet*, but as the culmination of a political bind, of the trauma Haider has experienced and which is common to many Kashmiri youngsters. This trauma is heightened by the discovering of the dynamics of his father's death and by the personal uncovering of his unmarked grave (Sen, 2018).

During an interview, Bhardwaj declared that in *Haider* "Kashmir becomes Hamlet" (H. Singh, 2014). Hence, the protagonist's insanity may be seen as standing for the paralysing dilemma about whether Kashmir should be a free state or rather a part of India. No single character fully enacts "the Hamlet experience," but each of them embodies some of the different aspects that make Kashmir Hamlet. For example, the representation of the region's ordeals and political indecisions fall on the female characters, who thus appear as effective agents. Arshia seems to be more rebellious than her Shakespearean counterpart, as she initially disregards both her father's and brother's impositions on her private life in order to consort with her beloved Haider, whom she helps in his search for Hilaal by enabling him to access hospitals and army bases thanks to her role of journalist. Combining Horatio's and Ophelia's functions, she proves to be an active participant in Kashmir's political life; nevertheless, she is allegedly committed to nonviolence, opposing, on the one hand, state-enforced brutality, on the other, militancy. This commitment, together with her loyalty to her police officer father, leads her to finally betray Haider, as she discloses his plan to kill Khurram with a gun received by Roohdaar. Likewise, Haider's mother Ghazala is torn by a similar interior conflict, as her new husband owes his allegiance to the Indian state, while her son is increasingly involved with the insurgents (Sen, 2018). The really pacifist sentiments of the film are endorsed by Haider's paternal grandfather, a non-Shakespearean character. He is the person who suggests to Ghazala that she should send her son to Aligarh, where he has a friend, "to see the other side of India, a world without imprisoned days and curfews at nights" (0:51:00 – 0:51:10).

[This dialogue is part of a flashback. The camera lingers on a street wall, where someone wrote "Go India Go Back."]

HAIDER'S GRANDFATHER: God alone knows when blood will stop raining on our land.

ZAHOOR: It's all up to India. As they say in India, "birth right." And we are only claiming our right... Freedom.

GRANDFATHER: Freedom... Gandhi won it for India... not the gun. The gun only knows how to avenge... Commander... revenge does not set you free. True freedom lies beyond violence. Remember... Revenge only begets revenge.

(0:52:38 – 0:53:40)

Various commentators, however, have underlined that the film does not criticise the governmental policies enough and rather justifies the use of excessive force in the region. Brigadier T. S. Murthy is an explicit defender of the Indian army, even though his words are clearly used to make the audience reflect.

T. S. MURTHY: I would like to remind you of our neighbour [Pakistan] that arms and trains misguided Kashmiri youth to kill innocent people. In 1948, they had looted Kashmiris when they came as tribals... raped the women and killed their children. It was the Indian army that shed blood to save Kashmir. And if we aren't around, it'll happen again.

ARSHIA (In English): Does the law allow you to torture people you've arrested?

T. S. MURTHY (In English): The Indian army is one of the most disciplined armed forces in the world. We train our officers to interrogate, and not torture.

(1:00:28 - 1:01:14)

In general, it can be said that *Haider* does not align itself with one side or the other, as Doctor Meer's initial hesitation in choosing one precise camp exemplifies (Mookherjee, 2016: 3). Only after his arrest, the father, from being a politically neutral professional, becomes a stubborn, rebellious, and embittered prisoner: along with Roohdaar, he is the only one that does not shout *Jai Hind*, "Long live India!".

'The worst part was the psychological torture. They would make us say Jai Hind every morning and evening. They beat you if you refused.'

(Peer, 2008: 146)

A powerful, recurring image in the film is that of the "house." In *Haider*, the house represents a physical ensemble of memories, a place "always ghosted by previous experiences and associations" (Carlson cited in Mookherjee, 2016: 6). The house is a building that, in itself, must serve as a home for a family, so much so that, for the protagonist, the disappearance of the father cannot be separated from the destruction of his family's nest. In the opening of the movie, "home" is where the rebel Latif is going

to be operated; “home” is also the concept that, in the meantime, Ghazala is teaching to her students.

[At school. The whole scene is in English.]

GHAZALA: What is a home?

It is brothers and sisters...

PUPILS: And sisters

GHAZALA: And fathers and mothers.

PUPILS: And mothers

GHAZALA: It is unselfish acts and kindly sharing. And showing your loved ones you're always caring...

PUPILS: Caring

GHAZALA: What is a house?

(0:03:42 – 0:04:12)

In the film, houses are often misappropriated and used to serve other functions beyond the designed ones: Haider's house, for example, is said to frequently double as a clandestine operating theatre. The primary school is used as a military interrogation centre; the movie theatre serves as the place where prisoners are identified (Mookherjee, 2016: 6-7). Similar appropriations of buildings are very common in Kashmir: the already-mentioned PAPA-2 detention centre, for instance, after having been built as one of Hari Singh's mansions, for several years was a hotel, the Fairview Guest House (Peer, 2008: 141).

Haider's childhood and adolescence memories are triggered by the vision of his house in ruins, where he wants to be driven immediately after having returned to his native town. According to reviewer Sudish Kamath, from this moment on the protagonist's "journey" proceeds "from the ruins of his home to the refuge of a graveyard," where another house is blasted at the end of the movie (cited in Sarkar, 2017: 7). The three times Haider returns to the remains of his family's house (one with Arshia, one alone, and another with Ghazala) stress the notion of "ghostliness" that "haunts" the film. Such a feeling is furthered by the position of the camera, which often follows the young man while he excavates among furniture, dusty photographs, toys and other objects used daily by his family, like a now-broken vase (Mookherjee, 2016: 6).

In terms of physical appearance, the protagonist's descent into madness is determined by his gradual transformation into a militant, which involves altering his

physical features and dismissing his Westernised clothes. Mookherjee (2016: 8) notices that, at the very end of the film,

[d]ressed in dark monochromatic clothing, with a pronounced limp, after the loss of every remaining marker of his identity - his lover and his mother - Haider is transformed into the photo negative of washed out, pale and ghostly Roohdaar.

The film, then, closes with the following end titles:

In the last two decades, thousands of lives have been lost in the Kashmir conflict. / The last few years of relative peace have renewed hope, with tourism growing from just 4.2 million tourists in 1995 to 140 million tourists in 2013. / In the recent devastating floods in Kashmir, the Indian army saved the lives of thousands of civilians. We salute their efforts and their valour. / Principal photography for this film was entirely conducted in Kashmir without any disruptions.

These clarifications announce the region's progress to relative normality and thank the Indian army for their precious intervention during 2014 floods. Nevertheless, in Kashmir Valley violence has not ceased yet, and India's relationship with the land continues to be fraught. In July 2016, for example, after the militant leader Burhan Wani was killed during an encounter with the Indian security forces, protests exploded. Demonstrations were followed by a month of unceasing curfew, which also entailed injuries and deaths among the civilians and the security personnel. The police and the Indian paramilitary forces caused thousands of casualties by using pellet guns (Mookherjee, 2016: 10).

5.2 The characters

5.2.1 The oedipal relationship between Ghazala and Haider and the mother's self-sacrifice

According to Chakravarti (2016), the real hero of Bhardwaj's adaptation is Ghazala (from whom the strongest vindication of violence derives), as she triggers the film's ending by detonating bombs on her body. More than Haider, she is caught in a tragic dilemma, divided between the obsessive love she feels for her son and her need to live a normal life. Neither with Hilaal nor with Khurram is she able to achieve serenity, plunging, instead, into the depths of an increasing despair. Gertrude's Kashmiri

counterpart, whose interior drama draws viewers into the film, is visually interpreted by an almost-always sad-eyed Tabu. She is shrouded in such mystery that “she hijacks the movie, pushing Haider to the sidelines in his own story” (Saltz, 2014).

When Haider is only a boy, Ghazala finds a gun in his school satchel. During a flashback, the audience are shown her while rummaging into her son’s rucksack, probably because she already has some doubts about her son and his friends. Unable to convince him to go to Aligarh to study, so as to prevent him from mingling with Kashmiri militants or crossing the border, one day she shows up at the park where he is playing cricket with his company and threatens suicide by aiming the gun at her own head. She appears powerful and manipulative, as Haider, in present time, accuses her of having always been.

HAIDER: You know, if you go to Delhi you’ll easily get a job.

GHAZALA: Where?

HAIDER: The National School of Drama.

Please, do stop your theatrics now!

GHAZALA: What do you mean? Why am I to blame?

HAIDER: Emotional blackmail... ever since my childhood... you would stop eating or leave home. You would cry away or threaten suicide. That is how you sent me away to Aligarh, banished me from my home... away from my father...

(0:48:20 – 0:48:58)

At the end of the movie, however, when she blows herself up as a suicide bomber, she follows the same strategies used by those very militants she did not want her son to associate with. In the closing scene, she affirms her agency: in effect, unlike Gertrude, she does not die “in the ‘hugger-mugger’ of a botched male plot,” but rather shows the power to decide about her own life. Thus, in this cinematic tragedy in which neither the title character nor the villain dies, and no revenge is wreaked, it is the mother’s suicide to be surrounded by a tragic aura (Chakravarti, 2016: 131).

According to Taebi, the film focuses so much on the Oedipus Complex that Indian audiences may be shocked (2016: 4). The Oedipus Complex in boys, which Freud expounded in detail in “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes” (1925), can be summed up as the boy’s wish to kill the father so as to fulfil his libidinal desire for the mother (Klages, 2006: 70). Freud himself discussed the relation between Oedipus and Hamlet and concluded that Hamlet delays his revenge for his father’s death because “his uncle has only carried out a murder that

he himself wanted to accomplish” (Norton, 2001: 916). In *Haider*, the mother-son intimacy is rendered efficaciously via cinematographic devices like flashbacks.

The overwhelming, mutual love between the young man and his mother is evident from the very beginning of the film, when Haider returns home from Aligarh and finds Ghazala enjoying time with his uncle Khurram after only twenty days have passed since his father’s disappearance. Haider does not have any immediate reaction against the two having fun together like a couple of smitten teenagers; he rather stands lingering behind the veiled curtain that encloses their “pathetic” singing spectacle until his mother realises he is there. Ghazala calls him “My angel” (as she does throughout the whole film), approaches him, and finally asks him the typical questions mothers usually address their children after they have been away for a long period of time. She seems to be avoiding the argument of Hilaal’s disappearance by feigning interest in his loss of weight, growing a beard and writing his thesis. Even though she does not admit it, her shame and guiltiness are manifest. Haider, on his part, cannot believe his eyes and ears: he is shocked and replies to his uncle’s explanations in an emotionless and defiant way. When the young man mentions his father’s disappearance, Ghazala slaps him in the face, as she would do in the past. In a subsequent flashback, viewers are shown that she already slapped him when, as a teenager, he confessed that he wanted to join militants. Haider leaves the room without saying a word. Ghazala feels sorry for what she has done, so she immediately chases after him in remorse. Her son, however, neither looks back at her nor stops. She appears to be overcome with a feeling of utter despair, so much so that, as viewers later learn from Khurram, she begins to fast and refuse to touch water until she manages to see her son again. “Emotional blackmail” remains her winning strategy.

Two flashbacks follow: the first in the form of a video recording that Haider watches together with Arshia; the second in the form of a mother-son recalling of the time when Ghazala threatened suicide in order to convince him to move to Aligarh. After this second flashback, mother and son revive their family’s past in a long conversation in which Ghazala also reveals the feebleness of her marriage with Hilaal. In effect, since the very beginning of the movie, she appears melancholic and sad, a woman living a life of suffering and pain, an existence with which she seems to be constantly dissatisfied. Her eyes are always veiled by tears, her facial expression is usually grimacing and contorted; she is continually concerned with some issues. The dialogue between the two well explains the type of relationship Haider has with both his

parents: a troubled one with a deeply-loved mother that has always cared about her only child, about his well-being and safety; a more harmonious one with a father probably too busy with his job to be fully aware of his son's adolescent inner turmoil and desire for approaching militants. A general impression of parental rivalry, or better of Ghazala's envy at Haider's attachment to his father, is also conveyed by the woman's words.

GHAZALA: Either way, you will always blame me... I am used to it.

I know you love your father more than anyone else...

You certainly don't realise... what I went through when you were away.

Hilaal had lost himself in the hospital, a saint saving lives. I used to wail like a hollow bamboo in your memory. I would wait months for you to return home in the holidays. It is my fate to long... to wait... First for you... Now...

HAIDER: And now?

GHAZALA: The wives of disappeared people are called 'half-widows' here. We can only wait. That is all I can do. Wait.

HAIDER: For father to return?

GHAZALA: Yes.

Or for his corpse.

(0:56:25 – 0:58:28)

At these words, Haider bursts into tears, falls to his knees, and starts crying in his mother's lap. He does not accept that his father could be dead. Hence, he does not accept Kashmir's brutal reality.

One of the rare moments in which Ghazala seems to be serene is after Khurram's winning the elections. She is framed in a full shot: she is wearing a pair of sunglasses and a green veil covers her head; she looks directly at the camera and gives the audience a thin, malicious smile. This shot immediately comes after a TV reporter saying:

Will the new regime bring a brighter future for Kashmir? Only time will tell.

(1:02:22 – 1:02:35)

In this context, such a smile can probably be an allusion to her imminent wedding with Khurram. The joyous news of the man's positive outcome at the elections and the special celebrations held in his honour are nonetheless followed by a greyish shot

showing Ghazala and Hilaal's house in ruins: it is thus another return to the past. Haider is there, in silence, shining his father's dusty shoes as he used to do as a teenager. The contrast is stark: "the brighter future" is opposed to a still-haunting dark past; the father's memory is alive, not ready to be replaced by Khurram, so much so that this very brief interlude immediately precedes Roohdaar's coming on scene. The shoes are being polished, partly to evoke a nostalgic childhood memory, partly in hope of Hilaal's imminent return. Ghazala's smile, though, remains ambiguous, difficult to interpret: it almost seems that of a conniving person. The audience, in effect, later learn that she is responsible for the whole tragedy suffered by her family even if her involvement was totally involuntarily.

After Haider's discovery of his father's tomb, the scene moves to Ghazala's bedroom. The woman, almost realising that something has changed, suddenly wakes up with a feeling of discomfort. It has been two days since she does not have news about Haider, and neither Arshia nor the Salmans know where he is. Moreover, she has just had a nightmare about her son letting himself fall into the cold waters of the Jhelum River⁵⁸, which is actually the place where Hilaal died after having been shot dead on a bridge together with Roohdaar. When, at Lal Chowk, Haider, head shaven and apparently got crazy, approaches her with a photo of her dead husband, she almost faints. Deeply upset by seeing her son in such conditions, she cannot stop weeping. Haider, on his part, blames and reproaches her, even recalling the day she was joyously singing with Khurram. He seems to be cold-hearted in his speaking to his mother; viewers, however, notice that, every time she needs him, he runs at her. At Lal Chowk, he reaches her because Khurram asks him to do it; he reaches her when she is fasting for his absence; he agrees on meeting her before crossing the border; he agrees on talking to her before having his revenge on his uncle; he is even caught by the police because he is distracted by his mother calling him by name after he has attempted to kill Khurram.

Taebi underlines that the sexual traits of a relationship between mother and son are acceptable in South Asia in the case of loveless marriages, that is, when women do not love their husbands anymore and love their sons instead (2016: 5). Similarly, in Muslim tradition, it is not incestuous for a man to marry his brother's widow so as to take care of her. Furthermore, in Kashmir, if a man disappears under any circumstance, after four years his wife can remarry with a new man. Waiting for a too short period of

⁵⁸ Viewers wonder whether Haider really dives into the Jhelum. The scene seems to be dreamt by his mother, even though its precise interpretation remains unclear.

time – twenty days have passed when Haider returns (two months in *Hamlet*) – has thus been Ghazala’s only mistake (Chaudhury, 2016: 535-6).

As learnt in the previously-reported conversation between mother and son, before Haider’s discovery of his father’s death, Ghazala is defined as a “half-widow,” which is the nickname commonly given to the wives of the disappeared in Kashmir. The term indicates a condition of perpetual anticipation in which women linger waiting for either the return of their husbands or the confirmation of their death. They are called as such because they do not know if their husbands are alive or dead; hence, they are deprived of their status as wives, but also of their status of widows. When Khurram asks Ghazala when she comes back to school in her role of teacher, she replies that she will only when she returns a whole.

KHURRAM: I bumped into the principal of your school yesterday. He wanted to know when you are returning to teach. The children miss you very much...

GHAZALA: Once I become a whole.

KHURRAM: What are you now? Half?

GHAZALA: I am half-widow and half-bride.

(1:22:45 – 1:23:06)

Another noteworthy mother-son conversation takes place before Ghazala’s wedding ceremony with Khurram. This dialogue testifies to Haider’s obsession with her since childhood: he was annoyed by his father touching her and sleeping between them two; he would even fight with him for such reasons.

GHAZALA: Remember what you would say when you were a child?

HAIDER: What?

GHAZALA: ‘When I grow up I’m going to marry my mommy.’ You would snuggle between your father and me. Even if he touched me you would fight with him.

HAIDER: And now his brother touches you... What should I do now?

Who would want to share you with the world?

(Whispering) Your beauty is venomous.

(1:42:28 – 1:43:18)

Mother and son are reflected in the mirror: Haider puts some perfume on her neck, then smells it and kisses it tenderly.



Figure 27

This shot replicates an identical moment between Ghazala and teenage Haider which viewers are shown during a flashback at the beginning of the film (0:18:32 – 0:19:54). These two identical scenes make their oedipal relationship crystal clear, both visually and in words: Haider's desire to kill Khurram increases, not only because he made his father disappear, but also because he is going to marry his mother, something he himself has wanted to do since he was a child.

The last two encounters between Ghazala and Haider occur in two houses, an already-mentioned trope of the movie: the first time, they meet at their blown-down home in the village, the second, in the house at the graveyard, where Ghazala eventually makes herself explode to both put an end to her wretched life and especially to try to save her beloved son in extremis. On the first occasion, the mother learns she has been the cause of everything that has happened since the night of her husband's disappearance. The explicative scene that shows Ghazala receiving a phone call from her brother-in-law is revived through a flashback: that fateful night, she felt sick in the bathroom, both because of the anxiety derived from having a militant leader in the attic, and because she had been given a bucket full of bloodstained gauzes to clean. The telephone rang: it was Khurram, who asked her if there was something wrong. Without suspecting that he was an informant of the Indian army, she, who was the only person to know that Latif was there, confessed to him the reason of her growing apprehension, thus setting in motion all the following events. As the broken mirror in her ruined house reflects, Ghazala is an involuntarily two-faced character. She did not hate Hilaal, she did not want to harm him; however, she makes her son, and the whole audience, understand that she already had an affair with Khurram. At the end of the flashback, Ghazala asks her son to end her life, so she takes his gun and points it at her own temple. Parvez's arrival interrupts the scene; viewers, however, are almost certain that Haider would have never pulled the trigger.

In “*Burning Paradise: A Comparative Study of Agha Shahid Ali’s Poetry and Vishal Bhardwaj’s Haider*”, Deshmukh asserts that Ghazala “stands for Kashmir”: as India and Pakistan are in conflict for the region, Khurram and Haider are fighting for her. Similarly to Kashmir, she is “no man’s land.” After having failed in convincing her only son to surrender, the woman eventually faces death in the desperate attempt to save him from further hatred and, possibly, from militancy. Likewise, the whole region continues to bleed, torn between the beauty of the past and the bleakness of the future, desirous to see the upcoming generations dwell happily in its valleys. Preventing Haider from joining militants would be equivalent to preventing him from an almost-certain disappearance or death. Ghazala did it once, and she does it again, even if this time, because of the extreme action she decides to perform, she cannot be certain of her son’s subsequent decision. Due to the film’s open ending, also spectators are not made to know anything about Haider’s future (2016: 7-8). It is likely that the young man will join militants’ troops nonetheless. In any case, Ghazala’s suicide can be interpreted as the utmost version of some Shakespearean adaptations of *Hamlet* that have Gertrude drink the glass of wine destined to her son because she is conscious that it is poisoned. In these productions, the mother thus makes a final, desperate effort to save him.

According to Sarkar, similarly to Indu in *Omkara*, Ghazala can be understood as the stereotype of the sacrificial mother, whose prototype is Radha in *Mother India*. However, since her suicide attack is not aimed at the safety of her land but rather endangers public security, she can also be interpreted as the repudiation of the same prototype. Unlike Radha, Ghazala does not kill her son (the greatest sacrifice of all); like Indu, instead, she sacrifices her marriage (in this case by injuring her husband to an inevitable death) to save Haider. In order to do so, she even collaborates with Roohdaar, so with those militants she has always abhorred, ending up discarding the instances of pacifism she had recommended to Haider all her life (2017: 10-11).

GHAZALA (from the outside): My angel!

My angel!

(She enters the house; a seriously wounded Haider goes down the stairs.)

My angel!

If you got so much as a scratch as a child... I’d tear apart the world... You are now covered in blood and I can’t do a thing.

HAIDER: Mother... I won’t surrender.

GHAZALA: Do you want to see me as a widow again?

Angel... There's no greater pain than to see the corpse of your child.

HAIDER: There is... To die without avenging the murder of one's father.

GHAZALA: Revenge begets revenge... Revenge does not set us free... Freedom lies beyond revenge. True freedom. I beg you drop your weapons, surrender... or else...

HAIDER: Or else? You won't live through it?

(2:25:50 – 2:29:30)

Ghazala kisses him on his forehead, on his cheek, then delicately on his lips. A trace of a smile appears on her lips. She goes out of the house; after a few steps, she stops and removes her mantle. Khurram and his soldiers, who are in front of her, see the vest; also Haider, from the inside, understands what she is going to do. Both husband and son, one from one side of the graveyard, the other from the house, start running to stop her. Their skip, which in reality occurs in a matter of seconds, is shot efficaciously in slow motion, so as to stress the mounting tension of the moment and the vain attempt of the two men. There's nothing left to do: Ghazala looks at the sky, then makes herself blow out. She remains on the ground as a heap of ashes. In addition to being a demonstration of filial love, her extreme action can be read as an act of self-redemption and self-punishment as well (Sarkar, 2017: 11).

5.2.2 Roohdaar: the physical incarnation of the Ghost

The Shakespearean ghost-figure was used by Jacques Derrida to theorise the neologism “hauntology” in his *Spectres of Marx* (1993), which discusses the relevance and future of Communism after its demise. Replacing its near homophone “ontology” (the branch of metaphysics that studies the nature of being and existence), this concept combines Marx and Engels' statement, “a spectre is haunting Europe,” at the beginning of their *Communist Manifesto* (1848) with the Shakespearean idea of the indeterminate and haunting ghost that “straddles the border between the present and the absent, the living and the dead, the past and the future” (Mookherjee, 2016: 5). In effect, act 1.1 of Shakespeare's play begins with the appearance and sudden disappearance of a ghost, seen around one o'clock in the morning first by the sentinels, then by Horatio. In act 1.4-5 and act 3.4, the ghost appears again, this time manifesting itself to “his son” Hamlet. In Bhardwaj's film, instead, the initial apparition of the spectre is replaced by the initial enforced disappearance of the protagonist's father, so much so that Mookherjee avers that, in the movie, “[t]he catalytic plot element is not the Ghost's injunction, but [...] the unexplained and merciless arrest of Hilaal Meer” (2016: 5).

In *Haider*, a kind of ghost-figure is nonetheless present: it is not a proper spirit like in *Hamlet*, but rather a flesh-and-blood character to whom a complete narrative is given. He is a Pakistani agent called Roohdaar, a man caught by the Indian army, incarcerated, tortured at MAMA-2 with Haider's father, then destined to the same death in the icy waters of the Jhelum River. Roohdaar is introduced as a mysterious, limping, middle-aged man "dressed in dazzling white with dark shades," always wearing a black hat and a pair of sunglasses, presumably to both hide his identity and mask a serious wound under his right eye. Since Roohdaar is an eyewitness to the doctor's death, the Shakespearean Ghost's speech is turned into a realistic narrative visually rendered through a series of flashback sequences describing harrowing torture scenes that denounce the brutal treatment suffered by Kashmiri prisoners (Chakravarti, 2016: 130).

If Roohdaar is assumed to be the Ghost's equivalent, a relevant structural change is the delay of his entry until halfway through the film, when Haider, unlike Hamlet, is already a determined man of action desperately looking for his father. As reported above, the youngster's motivation has already been strengthened by his father's disappearance, thus action is translated as his determinacy to find his parent alive. Like all the disappeared, Hilaal becomes a ghost whom Haider is desperately seeking for. Part of the young man's searching is shown during *Jhelum*, one of the music interludes of the movie (0:37:50 – 0:41:35). The youth makes photocopies of his father's photographs and begins to visit detention centres and army bases asking common people and soldiers if they happened to see him or know where he could be. It appears particularly disheartening when one soldier laughs at his questions and throws the photographs in the air. The condition of the Kashmiri "ghosts" is truly appalling. On one occasion, Khurram tells a man that he has no authority to free his son from the Faraz cinema camp, but he can charge the youngster with some crime, so that he is transferred to prison and, at least, has no chances of disappearance. The utter nonsense of the region's situation is further testified to by Haider's request to file a formal report calling for intervention. To his appeal, Parvez replies:

Don't mess with the army, son. If you file a formal report, the chances of finding him will become even more bleak. (0:46:16 – 0:46:26)

According to Mookherjee, as *Hamlet's* Ghost occupies an indeterminate ontological space, being both present and absent, also Haider's father "is thrust into an indeterminate politico-judicial space where he is, by social and legal standards, at once

present and absent, alive and dead.” This means that, like all the disappeared Kashmiris, the doctor is perceived as being neither living nor dead and, at the same time, both living and dead. Spectators are never recounted Hilaal’s story from his own lips; his personality is rather revived by the other characters’ memories. As a matter of fact, for a large part of the film “his motivations remain opaque and his political allegiance unclear” (2016: 5). The beginning of the movie and the first conversation Hilaal has with his wife depict a man that seems to be fully committed to his job:

HILAAL: Lower the heat a bit... (The doctor is sterilising his medical instruments.) And the flames within you...

They can burn this house down! (Shuddering premonition of what will happen the next morning.)

GHAZALA: You’ll have the village burnt to ashes.

Doctor...

HILAAL: Yes

GHAZALA: Do you know what you are doing?

HILAAL: Exactly what a doctor should be doing.

GHAZALA: Which side are you on?

(Hilaal stops and thinks about his wife’s question for some seconds.)

HILAAL: I am for life.

(0:04:38 - 0:05:30)

From halfway through the film, it is Roohdaar that contributes to forging the doctor’s identity, making his first appearance after Khurram’s winning the elections. His presence is always associated with a specific tune: a recurring, non-diegetic melody plays even when, later on, the Salmans show Parvez and Khurram his photographs. Walking in the snow in an all-white attire, he is surrounded by a mysterious aura. In his first coming-on-scene, he remains out of focus for a section of the shot; thereby, his ghost-like fleeting nature is stressed. The first person Roohdaar meets is Arshia. He is reading one of her newspaper articles, whose title makes reference to the 8,000 missing people of Kashmir; when she goes past him, he congratulates her for the writing. Soon afterwards, he diagnoses a man with the “New Disease,” a psychological illness already mentioned in the previous subchapter which Peer explains clearly in his memoir:

[A] man waits for a long time, as if in a queue, before entering his own house. And then runs away and leaves in another direction. His family takes him to a doctor.

The doctor says, 'Ever since frisking has been introduced, a new disease has come up. Some people need to be frisked every time they see a gate; others frisk themselves.' He prescribes a 'body search' every time he reaches a gate. The family follows the prescription and the man's condition improves. (2008: 165-166)

Roohdaar helps the man enter the gate of his house using the same methods adopted by the doctor in Peer's account, and prescribes the same "unblocking technique" to his wife. Asked by Arshia if he is a doctor, he replies that he is "the doctor's soul," a first clue to his connection with Hilaal. His name itself is explicative of his nature: the first syllable (Rooh) can be translated as "spirit" or "soul," the second syllable (Daar) roughly corresponds to "one who owns or possesses." Therefore, not only is he the doctor's soul, but he also keeps and protects the doctor's spirit (Mookherjee, 2016: 5).

Roohdaar follows Arshia, who begins to be scared by his presence. He tells her he has a message for Haider, then takes his phone number out of his hat, reveals his name, and exits from scene. The first part of the film is made to end here, with Roohdaar slowly going out of focus: after he has pronounced his name, the camera focuses on Arshia's astonished facial expression, then switches again to the man while he is limping away. On this occasion, it is evident that the girl functions as Horatio's counterpart, being the one who leads Haider to the "Ghost." The two meet at 9 am, on Zaina Kadal bridge, Downtown. They are followed from the distance by the Salmans, who take some pictures of the encounter. While following Roohdaar, Haider is suddenly covered his face with a kind of black sack and secretly conducted to the graveyard house, where Roohdaar himself and the militant Zahoor unveil the painful truth about his father's destiny. Initially, the young man does not believe their words and decides to leave the room. He is convinced to keep listening to their story after having heard Roohdaar reciting the first lines of a song Hilaal used to sing when Haider was a child, and which he used to perform in prison too. There, since the lights of the cells were never turned off and the prisoners craved for darkness, the doctor's voice acted as "a balm" to his cell-mates' agony. Roohdaar's long recalling visually appears as an alternation of flashback scenes and voiceover narration. A special emphasis is immediately put on the idea of Roohdaar being Hilaal's soul, thus on his immortality. Subsequently, Roohdaar discloses the shocking truth about Hilaal's betrayal, which also entails Ghazala's involvement. Reviving a conversation he had with the doctor, he finally conveys to Haider his father's message.

[Flashback]

HILAAL: (after singing) Roohdaar.

ROOHDAAR: Yes.

HILAAL: If you do make it out alive... convey my message.

ROOHDAAR: To whom?

HILAAL: To my son, Haider. Tell him to avenge my betrayal... by my brother. Tell him to aim his bullets at those cunning, deceiving eyes... that entrapped his mother... that made him an orphan.

ROOHDAAR: And his mother?

HILAAL: God will be her judge.

(1:17:16 – 1:18:08)

In the end, the mysterious man recalls the night of the doctor's death, then Zahoor mentions the exact location of the graveyard where he is now buried and gives Haider the gun with which he has to satisfy his father's desire.

While in *Hamlet* the title character suspects that his father's ghost may be a deceitful devil, in *Haider* the materialisation of the character makes the Ghost more believable (though always enigmatic and speaking in cryptic words). As a proof, Roohdaar's narration is immediately confirmed by Haider's finding of his father's grave in the very place he has indicated. In suffering the same experience of imprisonment and torture, Roohdaar was Hilaal's confidante; by escaping a shared death, he has become the only keeper of his friend's soul and the only spokesperson of his last wills and wishes. Unlike *Hamlet's* Ghost, who is unable to "tell the secrets of [his] prison-house" (1.5.14), Roohdaar discloses all the details of detention in prison-like Kashmir. For example, he confesses that he and the doctor were both politically-defiant captives, refusing to shout *Jai Hind* ("Victory to India"), the reason why they were moved out of a common cell and thrown together into a separate one. All in all, both Hilaal and Roohdaar are understood as kinds of ghosts. However, while the disappeared doctor appears to be deprived of his rights, his ghostly-counterpart is granted with a supernatural immunity, with the power to influence history, and with the authority to manipulate the narrative (Mookherjee, 2016: 5-6).

A different version of the events is provided by Khurram after he has seen the photographs taken by the Salmans that testify to the encounter between Roohdaar and Haider. Khurram's "moving performance" to persuade the young man of his own innocence and kind heart, however, is not particularly convincing. What is to be stressed is that, in his discourse, Roohdaar's "ghost identity" is further emphasised.

KHURRAM: I couldn't find my brother, Haider. But I have found his killer. He shared his cell at MAMA-2. He goes by the name Roohdaar... No one knows his real name. Every identity of his is a ghost identity.

(1:30:55 – 1:31:22)

The night after *Bismil*, which is *Haider*'s cinematic version of *Hamlet*'s "The Mousetrap," Roohdaar appears once again while the title character is sound asleep for having been sedated. This time, he is accompanied by Hilaal, who seems to be in flesh and blood: in *Hamlet*, the Ghost manifests itself in warlike form, wearing "the very armour he had on" as a king (1.1.59); in *Haider*, the father, in the only occasion he makes an after-death apparition, is a prisoner-version of himself, being probably less recognisable as he has long hair and beard and does not wear his glasses. From an interpretative point of view, the structure of this scene is not entirely clear: Hilaal and Roohdaar enter the room where Haider is sleeping; his mother Ghazala, on her knees beside the bed, is asleep too; following the entrance of the two characters, the woman opens her eyes, incredulous, and listens to her husband speaking of revenge to her son.

HILAAL: Haider... Avenge me of my brother. Aim bullets at those cunning, deceiving eyes that entrapped your mother... Don't forget... (1:55:05 – 1:55:34)

This episode corresponds to the third apparition of the ghost-father during the closet scene in act 3.4, when the Ghost reminds Hamlet of his duty to avenge his death.

GHOST: Do not forget! This visitation
Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.
(3.4.106-107)

As in *Hamlet* Gertrude is unable to see the spirit of her dead husband, also in *Haider* the scene seems more likely to be Haider's dream than a vision by Ghazala. In effect, when Hilaal disappears, the young man suddenly opens his eyes; his mother, on the contrary, is still asleep next to him.

Roohdaar's last appearances occur at the end of the movie: first, when, via a phone call, he suggests Haider, who has just killed the Salmans, to go across the border for training; second, when he is rung up by Ghazala, meets her and gives her a suicide vest, and finally drives her to the graveyard where she makes herself explode. In these

two final scenes, the mysterious man partly breaks his connection with Hilaal and rather puts himself in the convinced militant's shoes.

5.3 Analysis of a scene

5.3.1 "To be or not to be" and "The Mousetrap" in Shakespeare, Bhardwaj and Almereyda

Hamlet's most famous scene is undoubtedly the "To be or not to be" soliloquy. Another vividly-remembered part of the tragedy is "The Mousetrap," the successful play-within-the-play orchestrated by the protagonist to incite his uncle Claudius to "unkennel" his "occulted guilt" (3.2.76-77). In this section, I compare these two Shakespearean scenes with their adaptation in Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider*. Moreover, I analyse their renditions in Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet 2000* (2000), the first screen version of Shakespeare's revenge tragedy in the new millennium.

The proverbial first six words of *Hamlet's* fourth soliloquy establish a balance: Hamlet opposes the state of being alive with the state of being dead and considers suicide. He ponders whether to die or continue to live, even if living implies suffering the cruelties of fate. Were death synonymous of total sleep and unconsciousness, suicide would probably be the best solution. What saps the character's will, however, is the thought of what may happen after he has died. Therefore, he recognises that his endless speculations make him unable to have resolution and perform the ultimate action. Despite such musing seems to be directed to all human beings, critics are still debating about what the exact hamletic question is. As noted by Thompson and Taylor, some think that his dilemma concerns "whether life in general is worth living," others "whether he should take his own life," others again "whether he should act against the King" (from note 55, 2016: 314).

Hamlet's meditation is generally classified as a soliloquy, that is, a speech given out loud by a character to himself/herself usually while he/she is alone on stage. Strictly speaking, throughout "To be or not to be," the audience know that Claudius and Polonius are overhearing Hamlet, and also Ophelia has already come on scene. For this reason, in some productions of the tragedy, the prince is made to address directly his beloved (Thompson and Taylor, 2016: 21). Among these productions, the cinematic adaptation *Haider* can be included. In effect, *Haider's* thoughts are not conveyed through a soliloquy but through a monologue that is delivered to Arshia in the after-sex moment with which the musical interlude *Khul Kabhi* culminates; such an erotic scene

has no analogue in the original play. In addition to this, since Haider's main dilemma is whether to believe or not, he does not seem to be speaking for the whole human kind but only for himself. The question "To be or not to be" is instead the one that closes his reasoning.

ARSHIA: Everyone doubts you are going mad.

HAIDER: I trust my doubts but doubt my trusts.

ARSHIA: What do you mean?

HAIDER: I mean... Is Roohdaar the brave, beloved witness? Is Khurram the master of falsehood? Who tells a conceited tale? Who bears the cross of truth?

To believe or not to believe. That is the question... The answer hides in yet another question.

ARSHIA: What is that?

(Haider takes out a gun.)

HAIDER: To trust the surging beats of the heart... Or to heed the caution of sober mind... To kill or to die... To be or not to be.

(1:37:38 – 1:38:54)

In the film, the interpretation is clearer than in the play: the protagonist appears to be torn between the idea of killing his uncle, thus continuing to live a life full of pain, and the idea of just dying, being consequently relieved of all troubles.

Allusions to the "To be or not to be" line are made elsewhere in the film as well. For instance, Hamlet's dilemma is translated into a slogan chanted by the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP): when Arshia reaches Haider to give him Roohdaar's message, the young man is among them shouting "Do we exist or do we not?" (1:06:46 – 1:07:05). The hamletic question is further parodied by the Salmans when they are in doubt whether to follow Haider and Roohdaar or not.

SALMAN 2 (In English): Salman... To go?

SALMAN 1 (In English): Or not to go?

(1:08:26 – 1:08:34)

Finally, references to the soliloquy are made during Haider's monologue at Lal Chowk. It is on this occasion that the hamletic dilemma is generalised, as the question is directed at a crowd of Kashmiris to make them reflect about and react against their poor living condition.

HAIDER: Hello... Hello... mic testing one, two, three hello... Can you hear me? Hello, hello, hello, hello... UN council resolution number 47 of 1948. Article 2 of the Geneva convention and article 370 of the Indian constitution... Raises but one question!

GHAZALA: Haider...

KHURRAM: What?

HAIDER: Do we exist or do we not? If we do... then who we are? If not... then where are we? Do we exist at all? Or not?

(1:26:38 – 1:27:16)



Figure 28

Similarly to *Haider*, Michael Almereyda's adaptation features a truly young Hamlet: in 2000, in Manhattan, he is the son of the "King and CEO of Denmark Corporation" who has recently died. The youngster returns home from school, and, suspecting "some foul play" (1.2.254), finds his mother remarried to his father's younger brother. Despite various cuts, some additions, and some changes too, both story and language remain Shakespearean.

As witnessed by the two scenes I am going to analyse, one of the most outstanding characteristics of the film is Hamlet's relationship with his video camera, the instrument with which he tries to face and understand reality. The youngster is intimately linked to technology, so much so that he carries his camera with him everywhere he goes. Since Hamlet is an amateur filmmaker, his bedroom is overcrowded with screens and computers, and he is often engaged in editing and processing images. The sense of technological vortex conveyed by his attachment to filmmaking is sometimes increased by the repetition of these images in multiple screens. Viewers are thus asked "to understand his interiority in terms of the video record he manipulates" (Rowe, 2003: 47).

Before the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, these six words are pronounced in another scene which takes place after Hamlet has been to Ophelia's apartment (where

he has found her in her darkroom hanging pictures to dry) and has given her a love letter (then picked up by her father Polonius). Back to his bedroom after the only real moment of intimacy with his beloved young photographer, Hamlet watches a film clip of himself (recorded by himself with his own camera) in which he utters the famous Shakespearean line: while reciting it, first he points a gun at his temple, then puts it in his mouth, finally aims it at his chin. Cultural and cinematic resonances, also stressed by Hamlet's interpreter Ethan Hawke, are numerous: among these, Mayakovski's and Kurt Cobain's doom and subsequent suicide, and Mel Gibson's suicidal character in *Lethal Weapon* series of films.

Hamlet watches himself in closeup on the video monitor. More precisely, he watches two of his selves: one who intones "To be, or not to be" from the past with a pistol pressed to his temple and throat, concluding with an enigmatic smile after looking off camera [...]; and one in the present reflected in the monitor's glass, who can indulge in the magical undoing of rewinding, the compulsive repetition of replaying, and the contemplative luxury of freeze-frame. (Cook, 2011: 183-84)

According to Cook, the present Hamlet exists only because of the positive answer his past self gave to his existential question. The sequence of replay and rewind is repeated three times, ending incompletely with the third "to be." It thus raises a conundrum about the character's behaviour in the rest of the film: viewers are left to wonder whether Hamlet finally decides to end his life or not (2011: 184).



Figure 29

The proper "To be or not to be" soliloquy is instead located in a Blockbuster video store, even though Almereyda originally envisioned its shooting at the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York) "within a complicated installation of mirrors and video projections by the video artist Bill Viola." One of the ambiguities in setting that the majority of critical commentaries note is "the irony of the indecisive hero's presence

in the store's action film section," where only videocassettes featuring determinate characters should be present (Cook, 2011: 186).



Figure 30

Hamlet walks slowly down the central aisle of the store, glancing left and right at the shelves; once reached the end of the aisle, he looks up at the monitors, which show fragments of explosions, flames, and weapons. In the meantime, the words of the soliloquy can be heard as a voiceover. The following shot shows him walking toward the camera along a side aisle; this time, the soliloquy is not in voiceover but is delivered by Hamlet himself. The young man, monitors at his back, subsequently ambles down the central aisle again, finally coming back to his point of departure. The word “action” dominates the whole sequence: in the end, a higher camera position reveals that also the videotapes of one of the side aisles are action movies.

Almereyda's selection of the scenes displayed on the monitors of the Blockbuster is accurate. They are shots from Tim Pope's *The Crow II: City of Angels* (1996): a motorcycle explodes and, among flames, its rider is hurled into the air; the hero of the movie, Ashe Corven, returned from the dead to avenge his death and the death of his son, suddenly appears holding a rifle in his hands. For those viewers that know Pope's film, such extracts significantly recall the moment when the protagonist kills Curve, his most despised enemy. In effect, at the very end of the scene, Hamlet's soliloquy closes with the camera focusing on the central monitor: this shows Corven crossing a wall of flames to reach his enemy in order to obtain his revenge at any cost (Cook, 2011: 186-87).

In his chapter “Uncanny Imagination,” Cook also gives relevance to the titles of some of the videocassettes that are shelved in the store. While Hamlet returns up the central aisle, ultraviolent films belonging to the same category of *City of Angels* (like Kusama's *Aeon Flux*, Ōtomo's *Akira*, and Screaming Mad George and Wang's *The Guyver*) can be spotted. Towards the end of the youngster's meditation, Houston's *The*

African Queen, Zinnemann's *A Man for All Seasons*, Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and finally Reed's *The Third Man*, are recognisable as well. Like Hamlet himself, the protagonists of such classics (not usually placed in a common video store's action section) are "complex and conflicted characters who inhabit worlds filled with confusion and moral ambiguity" (2011: 187).

In Almereyda's adaptation, Hamlet visits the Blockbuster store again to collect the material he possibly needs for the creation of that film-within-the-film which substitutes Shakespeare's play-within-the play in act 3.2.

In *Hamlet*, act 3 begins with the title character instructing a group of travelling actors on how he wants them to play their parts so as not to overact but rather be as realistic as possible. Their play-within-the-play is generally perceived as two distinct parts: a dumb show and *The Murder of Gonzago*, both based on the story of betrayal told by the Ghost. Hamlet's aim, in effect, is to prove the Ghost's honesty and Claudius's guilt. In order to do so, he confesses his plan to Horatio and asks him to watch carefully the King's reaction, particularly during the scene that details the manner of his father's death.

HAMLET: If his occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel in one speech
It is a damned ghost that we have seen
And my imaginations are as foul
As Vulcan's stithy.
(3.2.76-80)

Along with Hamlet and his faithful friend, the play is attended by Claudius and Gertrude, Polonius and Ophelia, and by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. When the courtiers enter the venue, Hamlet departs from Horatio and pretends an antic disposition, first by answering in a cryptic way to both Claudius and Polonius, then by asking Ophelia if he can lie in her lap, which she understands in a sexual way. After Hamlet has exchanged some words with the young woman, the dumb show begins: it is a pantomime where actors mime a man killing a king by pouring poison in his ears after the latter has fallen asleep upon a bank of flowers. Pretending sadness, the murderer tries to comfort the desperate queen, then woos her with gifts; at first, she seems inconsolable, in the end she accepts his love. When the pantomime ends, the players enact the same story in the actual play, *The Murder of Gonzago*. When the Player

Queen swears the Player King that, should he die, she will never remarry, Hamlet asks his mother:

Madam, how like you this play?

QUEEN: The lady doth profess too much, methinks.

HAMLET: Oh, but she'll keep her word.

KING: Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in't?

HAMLET: No, no, they do but jest. Poison in jest. No offence i'th'world.

KING: What do you call the play?

HAMLET: *The Mousetrap* [...]

(3.2.223-231)

As Thompson and Taylor suggest, Hamlet invents this new title to probably stress his intention of trapping his uncle (from note 231, 2016: 343). During the performance, Lucianus, the actor who interprets the murderer, pours poison in the Player King's ears; Hamlet anticipates to Ophelia that he will subsequently win the love of the widow too. At this point, Claudius rises, asks to interrupt the spectacle and to give him some light. He then leaves the venue, thus proving his implication in the assassination of Hamlet's father.

In Bhardwaj's production, "The Mousetrap" is adapted as a Bollywood dance number, perhaps the most gripping in the whole movie along with the gravediggers' song, *Aao Na* ("Come Home"). Unlike the typical music interludes of Mumbai-produced films, however, this number is not limited to singing and dancing, but also entails the deliberate use of dramatic and theatrical effects. The show blends reality and fantasy, involves dancers, singers and puppets, and has the Hamlet character not seated among the audience like in the original play but acting as the lead performer. In *Haider* too, the protagonist's aim is to have his uncle Khurram, on whose wedding occasion the show is put on, make explicit connections with both characters and events, so that his guilt and the consequent truthfulness of Roohdaar's narrative could be proved. Unlike *Hamlet*, however, the audience is not restricted to the small court but rather includes a large group of Kashmiri citizens (Yates, 2016: 27-28).

Haider's performance is entitled *Bismil* ("Wounded Lover") and is set against the backdrop of the snow-covered ruins of 8th-century Martand Sun Temple in Kashmir. Its staging alludes to a 200-year-old Kashmiri tradition known as "Bahand Pather," in which stories are interpreted through songs and dances, usually in a satirical way. In

particular, in the dumb show, the puppetry of the leading Indian puppeteer Dadi Pudumjee is used: two relatively small puppets represent Ghazala and Hilaal, while a taller one symbolises Khurram, and, according to Yates, also “the larger threat of the military, corruption, death, and other threats to the people of Kashmir” (2016: 28-29).



Figure 31

These puppets are on the borderline between recognisability and unfamiliarity. The smallest two, though being just a bit shorter than real people, have a human form and are dressed in normal clothes; their only unfamiliar trait is the golden mask they are made to wear. The Khurram puppet, instead, is exaggerated: one side of its head looks like a beak, thus alluding to the nightingale of the song, while the other is devilish, painted in red and black. This two-sidedness of the mask symbolises Khurram being a two-faced character, a “falcon of bad intention” within whose folded wings lurks death (Yates, 2016: 29). In terms of lyrics, not only is the nightingale a metaphor for Ghazala, but also an allusion to anti-terrorist operations in Kashmir. In effect, it makes reference to “Operation Nightingale” or “Operation Bulbul.” “Bulbul,” the Urdu word for the Asian songbird, refers to “a mid-ranking military intelligence official of the 5 Rashtryia Rifles in Sumbai,” near Bandipora, in northern Kashmir; the word “song,” instead, used to serve as “a coded reference to details about anti-terrorist operations in the hard-hit Bandipora belt” (Swani cited in Yates, 2016: 32).

Despite dealing with the modalities of Hilaal’s assassination, the song also preserves the Shakespearean idea of poisoning.

The flower’s scent is filled with poison.

Stay away, stay away,

Don’t meet the flower

O nightingale’s heart.

(1:45:48 – 1:45:58)

[The falcon] found a home in the nightingale's dreams
And stung them with lethal venom
Put poison in the scented flowers
Sent to the nightingale in question.

(1:48:00 – 1:48:15)

In addition to this, the lyrics mention the bodies of the disappeared who are thrown into the Jhelum River. In this regard, in a self-reflexive moment, the words invite those who are watching the movie to recall an earlier song entitled *Jhelum*, which hints at the red blood of the prisoners that stains the river's waters. At a certain point, in order to revive Roohdaar's story, Hilaal's puppet is literally thrown off the stage. The camera is placed mainly in Khurram's point of view, while several wide shots display the vast size of the audience, of the ruins, and of the singers and dancers that perform together with Haider. Various scenes are also intercut by shots of the audience's reactions: the newlyweds, in particular, appear to be affected by the performance, "looking confused, concerned, sad and remorseful" (Yates, 2016: 32-33). At the end of the show, the young man jumps off the stage, splattering a piece of mud on Khurram's cheek; he then kneels in front of his uncle, who starts to clap. Unlike Claudius, who interrupts "The Mousetrap" and leaves quickly, Khurram smiles, then asks his nephew whether Zahoor or Roohdaar wrote the play. He adds that he has learnt about the gun he was given to kill him, thus unfolding Arshia's betrayal (as she was the only person to know about it). According to Yates, Khurram's laughing implies that he has understood the young man's intent, but nonetheless wants to maintain his position of power, which Haider cannot overthrow. Furthermore, Khurram orders Haider's "death" more directly than Claudius by immediately asking his men to follow him and send him to a mental institute (2016: 33).

As emphasised in the previous paragraphs, in Almereyda's version of Shakespeare's tragedy the play-within-the-play is replaced by a film-within-the-film. The filmmaker is the youngster himself: to make his movie, he neither engages nor instructs real actors but rather uses clips from different already-existing films and cartoons. Like in *Hamlet*, and unlike in *Haider*, no original material is used. The cinema audience, instead, is a bit larger than the Shakespearean one but smaller than that in *Haider*. Hamlet and Ophelia are seated in the foreground one next to the other, in a position that visually matches Claudius and Gertrude in the background; this allows the young man to turn easily and comment on his mother's happy relationship.

The principal model of Almereyda's "Mousetrap" is constituted by Conner's *Valse Triste* (1977), "a nondialogue, dreamlike montage narrative" which includes "the spinning earth, a dream sequence from a pyjama-clad little boy in bed, time-lapse imagery of a blooming plant, and outdoor exercises by girls in a physical education class, all edited to follow a Sibelius score" (Cook, 2011: 194). Arranged on Tchaikovsky's symphonic poem *Hamlet*, young Hamlet's "Mousetrap" resembles Conner's *Valse Triste* also in its use of a "playful paratextual framing." In effect, the film begins on a red background, then white block letters announce "The Mousetrap / A Tragedy by / Hamlet / Prince of Denmark." This short movie appears as a carefully-edited sequence of clips which, however, is not reducible to rational coherence: "[i]ts variety of film forms, its shifting of signifying mode between narrative and symbolism, and the multiplicity of narratives all conspire against logical paraphrase." Overall, Cook identifies twenty-nine clips, encompassing: a red rose (which opens in clip 1 and ripens and decays in clip 22), a young boy with his parents, the Earth turning in space, different allusions to poisoning, a queen with Roman soldiers and a prisoner, kisses and sexual intercourse, an audience clapping, and finally a man crowning himself at the mirror and then nodding in approval (clips 28 and 29) (Cook, 2011: 194-195). Like in *Haider*, close-up shots revealing the audience's reaction intermingle with Hamlet's film. For instance, Claudius is alarmed by the clips of poisoning by ear; Gertrude is flustered by a footage from the pornographic film *Deep Throat* (1972). In the end, after having seen the sequence of self-crowning, when also Tchaikovsky's symphony is significantly replaced by the triumphal music from the ending of *La Maldición de la Llorona* (a horror film that closes with the destruction of the evil characters), Claudius rises in alarm and leaves the room, thus finally proving his guilt (Cook, 2011: 197).

Conclusion

Imagine a young man dressed in black and wearing a hat adorned with coloured feathers who descends the stairs of an ancient snow-covered temple as, in the background, an apparently catchy melody starts to play. A spectator in the front row of a large audience begins to clap, while about fifteen dancers in a kind of grey uniform are moving to the rhythm of the music. Such a show lasts for more than six minutes and includes “live” music, dance steps, acting, and the use of tall puppets. The lead performer seems to look directly into the eyes of his audience, whose members are transported and emotionally engaged by the representation. Our hands and feet cannot stay still, and we are tempted to sing as well: we feel literally captured inside the screen. “Screen” is the exact word to use in this context, as the show is precisely one of the music interludes in Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Haider* (2014), nothing less than a Hindi cinematic version of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. This performance, in particular, reproduces “The Mousetrap,” which is the famous play-within-the-play through which Claudius’s guilt in the murder of his brother is proven.

Seeing this film, and especially the aforementioned captivating dance spectacle, during a university class prompted me to carry out a study that combined my abiding interest for the playwright of Stratford with my recently-born desire to learn more about film culture. Hence, I started to read some information about *Haider*’s Indian director and watched the other two movies that make up his trilogy of Shakespearean tragedies: *Maqbool* (2003), an adaptation of *Macbeth*, and *Omkara* (2006), a screen version of *Othello*. This trilogy has then become the focus of analysis of my master’s degree thesis, which I have structured into five chapters, two introductory ones, in which I have considered the general contexts of Shakespeare’s presence in India and of the history of Indian cinema, and three dedicated to one adaptation each.

Being a young woman, among all things I have particularly appreciated the way Bhardwaj adapted some Shakespearean female characters, making them active agents that often handle typically male weapons, thus challenging the traditional female roles of Mumbai’s mainstream cinema and of Indian society in general. In *Maqbool*, Nimmi incites her lover to kill his “godfather” by using physical and verbal expedients that prove to be more effective than the man’s own ambition. She is seductive and manipulative, to the point of aiming the gun at Maqbool (also firing a shot) in order to force him to declare his love for her; she is determined and deceiving, so that she risks

her own life asking her lover to choose whether he wants to kill her or the don. As Bhardwaj declared in an interview, she replaces Duncan's throne becoming herself Maqbool's own desired throne (TBIP Tête-à-Tête, 2014).

In *Omkara*, Dolly is more fragile than her Shakespearean counterpart; however, she too is made to handle a seemingly heavy rifle and point it at her husband-to-be (even if playfully). Her Dionysian opposite is Billo, a "woman with agency," a singing and dancing performer indifferent to social disapproval, who, during one of her dance spectacles, helps the gangsters entrap the man that has tried to murder the local politician they work for. The real hero (or better heroine) of the film, instead, is Indu, the self-sacrificing mother that kills her husband to preserve her son's and family's honour. Also Billo and Indu are made to handle a weapon: in Billo's case, during the aforementioned show organised to capture a rival gangster, she dances provocatively with a gun in her hand; in Indu's case, it is the blade she uses to hit and kill Langda. Most meaningfully, the weapon Indu is armed with is not a male one, but a characteristically female tool associated with grain threshing and food preparation (Heidenberg, 2014: 98).

Finally, in *Haider*, the two noteworthy female characters are Arshia and Ghazala. Arshia, definitely more resilient than Shakespeare's Ophelia, is a resolute young journalist committed to justice and peace: once gone mad, she does not commit suicide by drowning, but apparently shoots a bullet in her own head, presumably with her dead father's gun, while she lies in bed and sings wrapped in the undone red scarf she previously knitted for him. Ghazala, by contrast, is another self-sacrificing mother that decides to blow herself up to both punish herself and put a definite end to the tragedy that has hit her family.

Another feature of Bhardwaj's trilogy that immediately stroke me when I watched the three films for the first time is the extreme, brutal violence they display. On certain occasions, violence seems to be gratuitous and its presence on screen is certainly stronger than it is usually on stage. *Maqbool*, for example, begins inside a van, where two police officers kill one of Mughal's gangsters they have in custody. Although the man divulges information about the place where his don is hiding, he is shot dead nonetheless. His blood splatters on the glass window of the vehicle, thus staining the horoscope of Mumbai Pandit drew on it. Pandit reprimands Purohit not for having goaded and finished off their prisoner, but for having painted the horoscope red. Hence, the captive's death appears to be "nothing but a blot," the first of a series in a film

where these two policemen both organise and commit murders “with consummate ease, joking and making wisecracks as if these are the most natural part of their jobs” (Kapur and Pal, 2017: 141-142; 146). Still in *Maqbool*, some other inhumane scenes affected me as a viewer: towards the end, for instance, Purohit beats with a cane a prisoner that is hung head down from a rope tied to his cell’s ceiling; as he does not confess anything to the police, the officer shoots him in the head; with his blood, an unconcerned Pandit draws a chart on the floor and makes a prophecy to Maqbool. Likewise, in *Omkara* gunfights are the order of the day, so much so that the title character does not hesitate to make his “best friend” Langda answer his question regarding Dolly’s infidelity by putting a gun into his mouth. Unnecessary violence permeates *Haider* as well. In this case, it is perpetrated by both police officers and main characters. Moviegoers may be stricken by the nonchalance with which officer Parvez shoots at some Kashmiri prisoners while talking about political issues with Khurram. Haider himself kills the Salmans in a scene of unprecedented cruelty and brutality by smashing their heads with boulders.

Analysing Bhardwaj’s films against their socio-political and cultural backdrop, I have tried to show how a postcolonial director used Shakespeare’s tragedies “as a natural lens through which to view contemporary India” (Saltz, 2014). In effect, while watching the three movies, viewers are confronted with 20th and 21st-century India’s everyday reality. In *Maqbool*, for instance, the main characters come from one of the exiled Muslim communities that constitute a minority in mainly-Hindu Mumbai. This choice appears to be particularly meaningful in terms of religious orientation, because the film was produced after both the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the USA and the religious riots of 2002 in Gujarat, which made Muslims’ popularity in Bollywood decline rapidly. In the same movie, Bollywood industry itself is represented as being historically connected with the gangland, as Mumbai’s dons are generally fascinated with its stars and celebrities and are involved in the money laundering and lucrative video piracy that tarnish the film business.

As Kapur and Pal underline, in Bhardwaj’s two most recent adaptations, the “lawless-autocratic state” of *Maqbool* continues to be staged, though it remains in the background (2017: 152). In *Omkara*, the setting, despite being a small town in Uttar Pradesh and not a metropolis like Mumbai, gives, once again, plenty of opportunities for action and violence, so much so that *Othello*’s never-occurring war against the Turks is replaced by a continuing fighting between rival gangs. Common unlawful situations

are denounced, such as the frisking of police officers before they enter gangsters' compounds, and various local politicians' intrigues which also entail MMS sex scandals. *Haider* ends the trilogy by locating *Hamlet* amidst the insurgencies and civilian disappearances that affected the 1990s in Kashmir, a region over which India and Pakistan have fought since Partition (1947). Unlike Bollywood traditional representations of Kashmir as an eroticised place for lovers and honeymoons, the filmmaker depicted a politically volatile land in which early mornings are marked by crackdowns, fathers are separated from their families and made to disappear, young men are tortured and killed without any apparent reason, mothers and old fathers are condemned to spend the rest of their lives searching for their disappeared relatives. Both among Indian and non-Indian moviegoers, Bhardwaj's trilogy has thus encouraged lively debate about some of today's major concerns in the subcontinent.

Unfortunately, being a non-Hindi speaker, while watching the movies I have analysed, I had to rely completely on English subtitles. Though Bhardwaj himself used Shakespearean plots rather than Shakespearean specific lines, my investigation is probably limited, because subtitles do not convey the filmmaker's exact choices neither in terms of linguistic expressions nor in terms of stylistic devices. For this reason, I had also to rely on academic essays (when existing) to notice some relevant dialect inflexions in the parlance of the characters: in *Omkaara*, for instance, the Hindi spoken by Dolly is devoid of those Mewati and Bangru influences that characterise the speak of the other characters, thus testifying to her college education (Charry and Shahani, 2014: 117). Still in terms of language, viewers can perceive an increase in the use of English from the first to the last film, where entire conversations take place in this language; the English the director used, however, is never the Shakespearean one. Furthermore, the audience cannot help but notice that in both *Omkaara* and *Haider* a male character makes fun of the English pronunciation of a female one: on the one hand, Kesu unsuccessfully tries to teach the correct pronunciation of "bottom" in Stevie Wonder's *I just called to say I love you* to Dolly; on the other, Haider ridicules Arshia's mispronunciation of the past participle of regular verbs, as, for example, she says "lovved" instead of "lovd." Beyond language, some other similarities are easily perceivable: on two occasions, there is a woman caring for a man and kneeling besides the bed where he lies (Dolly next to *Omkaara*, Ghazala next to *Haider*); a couple of male characters provides comic relief (Pandit and Purohit in *Maqbool*, Salman and Salman in *Haider*; to a lesser extent, Rajju and Langda in *Omkaara*); a romantic ballad that involves the lead couple is played before

the main tragic events take place (*Rone Do* in *Maqbool*, *O Saathi Re* in *Omkara*, *Khul Khabi* in *Haider*).

Since Indians are culturally rooted in music and dance, and the director is a music composer himself, music interludes are present in all the three adaptations, even though Bhardwaj simultaneously deconstructed and broadened several Bollywood conventions. In effect, song and dance sequences are exploited to the minimum and, most significantly, they are not set in bucolic, foreign landscapes, but are well integrated into the storyline, so much so that they seem to intensify the power of Shakespearean tragedies in ways that, according to James Shapiro, many American and British adaptations of Shakespeare on screen do not get. *Bismil*, to which I have dedicated an entire section, for instance, makes use of a 200-year-old Kashmiri tradition called “Bahand Pather,” which is currently being carried on by some very poor families of the region even if it is slowly dying for lacking support by the State. Therefore, in this case, Bhardwaj’s film may also serve as a means to make such folklore be known, to possibly keep it alive, and to denounce the State’s disinterest towards some of its customs. This kind of denunciation via music could prove successful because, as the director asserted in a conversation with the above-mentioned professor, “[i]n India, people may forget the film [and the actors], but if a song becomes popular, they will always remember it” (TRM Editors, 2015).

While working on my dissertation, I listened to some of the few interviews the filmmaker ever did, so as to have a clearer idea of his standpoint on Shakespeare and of the way he appropriated the playwright’s most famous tragedies. First of all, he changed the medium through which to convey them, from theatre to cinema, but he adapted Shakespearean plots rather than Shakespearean words: in this way, he tried to satisfy the taste of the Indian average moviegoer rather than that of Indian intellectuals. The impression I got is that of a director who has contributed to creating a real phenomenon, “Bollywood Shakespeare,” without being initially aware of the impact his films could have at a national and international level. By his own admission, he first used *Macbeth*’s plot simply because he did like it, even thinking that nobody would realise he was making a movie set in the underworld by using a storyline from the Shakespearean canon. Most meaningfully, he did not read the entire play but only Charles and Mary Lamb’s highly abridged version for children. Hence, though in the introductory chapters I have remarked that Shakespeare is still present in Indian educational curricula, Bhardwaj has made me wonder if the way Indian high-school

students study the playwright is similar to the way Italian pupils study our national authors. The approach teachers use to explain Shakespeare in India is probably comparable to the way Italian teachers explain Alessandro Manzoni (just as an example) in our secondary schools: a very systematic and mnemonic one based on detailed argumentations and questions (provided by schoolbooks or by teachers themselves) to make students learn small and sometimes negligible details about characters and their actions. Unfortunately, such methods only lead youngsters to “hate” these authors and their masterpieces, to find literature extremely boring. Though mine is only a conjecture, the filmmaker himself confessed that he “feared” Shakespeare when he was at school and had to study *The Merchant of Venice*. The irony behind Bhardwaj’s movies, then, lies in the fact that a director who was afraid of the playwright of Stratford and knew almost nothing about him has “involuntarily” produced a Shakespearean trilogy that is now helping students, and Indians in general, to get in contact with his plays. Thus, they are also starting to appreciate his works and realise how their plots and characters are, in a way, still contemporary and near to the socio-political issues of their nation, certainly more than they used to think (TBIP Tête-à-Tête, 2014; SenGupta, 2017). As in the near future I would like to become a teacher of English literature in a secondary school, I am particularly interested in finding the most appropriate way to have my students study English authors and their works without finding them tedious. In this regard, Bhardwaj’s trilogy has also made me wonder if even unconventional screen adaptations of books or plays can occasionally be used as the first means to introduce a writer or playwright to pupils. Some screen versions of Shakespeare’s comedies and tragedies are already used at high-school and university levels in order to simplify the learning and comprehension of Shakespearean texts; sometimes, however, students end up watching these films to become familiar with Shakespearean plots but do not read the original plays anymore. Since comedies and tragedies were actually produced to be staged (thus watched), not read, and being a student and teacher-to-be myself, I perfectly understand that pupils find it easier and also more comfortable to understand a theatrical work by seeing and listening to it rather than to read Shakespeare’s 16th-century “obscure” language. Therefore, a further study I would like to carry out aims to investigate the possible use of screen adaptations in the classroom through methods that both enhance understanding and make students be aware that cinema and theatre are not the same medium: one cannot substitute the other, but, if they are employed effectively, they can complement each other.

To conclude, Bhardwaj directed his trilogy by using Shakespeare as his “co-writer,” appropriating the plots of his plays as Shakespeare himself did with his sources. The director thus created three original works in which the playwright is still recognisable but not felt as a burden on which to rely faithfully. Though initially thinking that his films, now also inserted in Indian university curricula, would not have gone beyond India, the director has recently declared his intention to film another trilogy, this time based on Shakespeare’s comedies. The filmmaker has already revealed that the first movie will be an adaptation of *Twelfth Night* and will be given the title of *Chaudhvin Ki Raat*. As all his other films, it will be set in contemporary India, since he wants to keep throwing light on today’s politics, culture and music. Quoting the first line in the comedy, “If music be the food of love, play on” (*Twelfth Night*, 1.1.1), the director has unveiled that music will undoubtedly be present in the backdrop, also thanks to his renewed collaboration with the famous lyricist Gulzar Saab. What remains still undisclosed is the name of the actress that will interpret the twins Viola and Sebastian. Bhardwaj, impressed by Cate Blanchett’s interpretation of Bob Dylan in Haynes and Moverman’s *I’m not there* (2007), is looking for his Indian Cate (Sundarami, 2018). Bets are open for all fans and scholars.

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