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## «TO BE OR NOT TO BE»: THE SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN INDIA

*"Ser o no ser": la tragedia shakespeariana de la enfermedad mental en la India*

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### Abstract

Indian Cinema fondly referred to as Bollywood, has remained the cultural barometer of the country while being a powerful medium of entertainment articulating contemporaneous societal and medical issues. Particularly, the portrayal of mental illnesses remains an interesting yet understudied domain to-date. Initially projected as synonymous with madness or insanity, psychiatric conditions gradually metamorphosed to more rational screen reflection. This article analyses the portrayal of the mental illness in three Hindi feature films (*Omkara* (2006), *Haider* (2014), *Maqbool* (2003) by Vishal Bhardwaj) that were based on the screen adaptations of Shakespearean Tragedy namely *Othello*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, respectively. Through this phenomenological deliberation, we discuss how these movies in their own style and expressions have embodied mental illness in a hitherto unexplored way. Using extended case studies, we qualitatively investigated how the spectrum of mental illness was depicted; how these representations operated within cinematic

narratives; whether the characters presented as an ideal; and, how the idea of the mental illness was an important construct for rendering structures comprehensible according to commonly held cultural understandings. Overall, we found, mental illness representations were characterized by a multi-dimensional morality; accompanied by gloomy structures with social chaos. Such adaptation of Shakespeare in the Indian context brings to light how mental illnesses is still perceived in India.

**Keywords:** Bollywood; mental illness.

### Resumen

El cine indio, conocido cariñosamente (entrañablemente) como Bollywood, se ha mantenido como el barómetro cultural del país al mismo tiempo que es un poderoso medio de entretenimiento que articula problemas sociales y médicos contemporáneos. En particular, la descripción de las enfermedades mentales sigue siendo un dominio interesante pero poco estudiado hasta la fecha. Proyectadas inicialmente como sinónimo de locura o insania, las condiciones psiquiátricas se metamorfosearon gradualmente en un reflejo más tradicional en la pantalla. Este artículo analiza la representación de la enfermedad mental en tres largometrajes en hindi (*Omkaara* (2006), *Haider* (2014), *Maqbool* (2003) de Vishal Bhardwaj) que se basaron en las adaptaciones cinematográficas de Tragedias Shakespearianas a saber Otelo, Hamlet y Macbeth respectivamente. A través de esta deliberación fenomenológica, discutimos cómo estas películas en su propio estilo y expresiones han encarnado la enfermedad mental de una manera hasta ahora inexplorada. Utilizando estudios de casos ampliados, investigamos cualitativamente cómo se describía el espectro de las enfermedades mentales; cómo operaron estas representaciones dentro de las narrativas cinematográficas; si los personajes se presentan como un ideal; y cómo la idea de la enfermedad mental fue un constructo importante para hacer comprensibles las estructuras de acuerdo con los entendimientos culturales comúnmente sostenidos. En general, encontramos, que las representaciones de enfermedades mentales se caracterizaban por una moralidad multidimensional; acompañadas de estructuras lúgubres en un caos social. Tal adaptación de Shakespeare en el contexto indio pone de manifiesto cómo todavía se perciben las enfermedades mentales en la India.

**Palabras clave:** Bollywood; enfermedades mentales.

William Shakespeare is widely regarded to be the world's greatest dramatist in the English Language. His thirty-nine plays hold the distinction of being translated in every major language spoken on Earth. One such translation being in the Indian Hindi language the lingua franca of the Mumbai based Film Industry. Where a critically acclaimed Indian film auteur Vishal Bhardwaj has adapted three of Shakespeare's most popular tragedies, Macbeth, into *Maqbool* (2003), *Othello* into *Omkaara* (2006) and *Hamlet* into *Haider* (2014). According to a leading Psychiatrist, Dinesh Bhugra films can act not only as a reflector but also as a reflection of the society. And somewhere Bharadwaj's adaptations of the complex

Shakespearean psychological plots invariably provide a unique preview into the perceptions of mental illness in India.

The content in Bhardwaj's films is known for staying true to Shakespearean plots, however, he reimagines the context in order to cater to the sensibilities of an Indian Audience. For instance, in *Maqbool*, Bharadwaj's first outing with Shakespeare's Macbeth, the court of Scottish King Duncan is reimagined with Jehangir Khan, a godfather-like figure in the Mafiosi system of Mumbai. Who is murdered as a result of hidden ambitions of *Maqbool* (Macbeth) in confluence with his lady love Nimmi (Lady Macbeth) who is shown as the consort of Jehangir Khan. While in

Bhardwaj's adaptation of Othello into Omkara, the Venetian plot is retold in one of the harshest hinterlands in India, where gun violence and cursive language can be the normative. Bharadwaj in these environs depicts the films Langda Tyagi (Iago) conspiring revenge for being passed over by plaguing the mind of Omkara (Othello). Against the promiscuous relationships between his new bride Dolly (Desdemona) and his newly appointed general Kesu (Cassio). While his third and final outing adapts Hamlet into Haider, where his paranoia in investigating his father's murder and his mother Ghazzala (Getrude) being betrothed to his main suspect, his father's younger brother Khurram (Claudius). Play out in the politically unstable and volatile realms of Kashmir.

Shakespeare plots known to intricately explore the workings of the human mind and their behavior have been keenly studied by psychologists. Psychiatrist Eliot Slater in 1969 published a paper, 'A psychiatrists view of Shakespeare's Sonnets', in which he suggested that the presence of melancholia in Shakespeare's characters arises as a form of an 'Endogenous Depression' that may be related to the dramatists personal mental state. The characters inner demons are seen as a cause behind their existential crisis, for instance in Hamlet where he starts his famous soliloquy with: «*To be, or not to be, that is the Question: Whether 'tis Nobler in the mind to suffer. The Slings and Arrows of outrageous Fortune, Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles*». However, in Bharadwaj's adaptation the characters mental disorder, take a more exogenous form. Where in a scene *Haider (Hamlet)* surrounded by a crowd depicted as a lunatic announces: «*Do we exist or do we not? If we do, then who are we? And if not, then where are we? Do we exist at all?*»

This concept of mental illness arising in individuals because of exogenous forces is a common belief in India. Where stigmatization of mental illness is a researched phenomenon, as

it is perceived not as an Individuals disorder, but a condition that can bring social humiliation for the entire family. In addition, psychiatry is viewed as a non- Indian concept resulting in barriers to seeking mental health treatment. Till today, studies discuss mental health patients being taken to faith healers for cleansing of sins or spirit possessions, for conditions such as schizophrenia and identity disorders. The concept of sin and its relationship with mental disorders can be appreciated in *Maqbool* the adaptation of *Macbeth*. In contrast to Shakespeare's character, where the paranoia of Lady Macbeth is internalized, as she narrates her inability to wash of the blood: 'Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.' Overcome by her own paranoia, her last lines in the play are: 'To bed, to bed. There's knocking at the gate. Come, come...give me your hand. What's done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed...'

However, in the same scene in Bharadwaj's adaptation *Maqbool*, the final lines of Nimmi (Lady Macbeth), are given more Indian cultural nuances with stereotypical beliefs. Where during a maniac episode unable to clean the invisible blood from the walls she narrates: 'The blood has clotted on the walls, how will they wash away now? ... These servants believe in free lunches ... the smell of blood is unbearable, step aside let me clean them...' While shortly breaking down in *Maqbool's (Macbeth)* arms she repents, her final lines in the film being: 'Are we mad? because everything was a Sin? Was our love a sin or pure?' This exogenous nature of insanity in Indian adaptations, distancing mental illness as a clinical disorder within the patient. And portraying it as a form of retribution can also be appreciated in *Omkara (Othello)* set in rural India. Where in the climax scene after Omkara has murdered Dolly (Desmodena). And just before shutting the door on Langda Tyagi (Iago) sparing his life and taking his own, he narrates: 'You might get freed from

*your body, but your soul will never be freed of this Sin... not yours ... not mine.'*

These cultural fabrications of stigma and mental instability, interwoven in Bharadwaj's adaptations transform the implicit nature of mental disorders experienced by Shakespearean characters, such as the exaggerated feelings of guilt, paranoia, suspicion fueling the insanity of Macbeth, Othello and Hamlet respectively. Into more explicit nature, extending mental illness from the realms of an individual to those having cultural and social layers. Portraying mental insanity as not resulting from an internal medical conflict but due to a cumulative complexity of the characters interaction with the society. In a form what Gustave Le Bon a French sociologist and psychologist explains, a societies collective mental state. Be it the exogenous volatile Mafiosi system in Maqbool, the hypersensitive environment in Omkara shaping his Othello Syndrome as coined by Psychiatrist John Todd. Or more categorically in Haider, where the character becomes a literal personification of

the collective instability raging in a community. This projection of mental illness in Shakespeare's Indian film adaptations somewhere reflect the true state of mental illness. With 'To be or not to be' being an apt status quo for the Shakespearean tragedy of mental illness in India. According to a recent Lancet study 'Mental disorders are among the leading cause of non-fatal disease burden in India.' However, in practise mental health understanding continues as an Exogenous condition needing retribution and not a medical condition requiring an Endogenous redressal.

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